

“Straight” A’s:
How Deviance Knots Made Standards-Based Literacy Policy a Gendered Racial Project

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Abstract

Education research finds harmful impacts of exclusionary curriculum on students and communities who are marginalized based on race and gender. Less understood are when, how, and why racial and gender biases intersect in upstream processes of policy development to shape exclusionary curriculum and structure conditions of inequitable learning. Using process tracing of archival documents to conduct a historical case study of U.S. federal literacy policy from the opening of a policy window in the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (1965) to the erasure of diverse literacies in policy texts shaping the *National Education Goals* (1989), this paper conceptualizes literacy education governance as a gendered racial project of nation-building. In so doing, it illuminates the political efficacy of a discursive mechanism that I call “deviance knots” — by which education reform has (re)produced hierarchical systems of not only race and gender, but also class and sexuality. The analysis demonstrates how the “excellence” movement tied deviance knots to interweave national moral panics, gain political legitimacy, and sew a gendered racial narrative in ostensibly race- and gender-neutral policy, which attributed rising illiteracy and underachievement to Black and Brown family behavior and federal policy under the Great Society. In turn, standards-based literacy policies created normative boundaries around curriculum, citizenship, and family structure in ways that neglected and erased Black and Brown women’s and queer communities’ literacy practices and kinship forms. This analysis provides traction for researchers interested in educational politics and policy and the politics of knowledge production about social identity formation and classification.

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“Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek – it must be rejected, altered and exposed.”

- Toni Morrison, Nobel lecture (1993)

Introduction

Socially conservative attacks on expanding curriculum in schools simultaneously implicate race and gender, even as these attacks sometimes position racial and gender categories as separate and even opposed. For example, while justifying Florida’s rejection of the AP African American History syllabus at a press briefing in January 2023, Governor Ron DeSantis said, “Now who would say that an important part of Black history is queer theory? [...] When you use Black history to shoehorn in queer theory, you are clearly trying to use that for political purposes.” This construction of a “boundary of Blackness” (Cohen, 1999) positions queer theory as something *outside* the domain of race and racial history. DeSantis also framed queer theory as existing “on the wrong side of the line for Florida standards” (qtd. in Atterbury, 2023). Officials often set conditions on racial and gender identity categories and mobilize these conditions to develop accountability-based curricular policy. Investigating linkages between racial and gender classification in the context of accountability policy is important because these discourses inform not only what knowledge students must learn and how, but also how the broader public makes sense of the identities and histories of communities and cultures.

DeSantis’ dual invocation of Blackness and queerness in order to create a fault line between them raises the question of how we should understand this boundary-setting: is

DeSantis using binary gender ideology in order to (re)construct normative racial identities and histories (i.e., who counts as “Black”), or is he deploying Blackness in order to reinforce binary gender norms and heteronormativity? Or both? And, critically, *why*? While education research has revealed how students and educators who are multiply marginalized by race and gender experience exclusion as a policy outcome (Brockenbrough, 2024; McCready, 2010; Truong et al., 2020), we know less about how exclusion unfolds as an intersectional *process* (Crenshaw, 1991). This relative inattention to the upstream processes that shape school- and classroom-level practices means that we know little about political mechanisms that structure and sustain racial and gender hierarchies in educational systems. Contrary to the field’s now-typical conceptualization of systems of power as intersectional and overlapping, the prevailing treatment of racial and gender exclusion as an individual- or group-level outcome can leave an impression antithetical to intersectional theory that racial and gender biases unfold separately and compound each other, in an additive way, based on how many marginalized identities one holds.

In this study, I clarify when and how racial and gender hierarchies can become (re)constructed, entangled, and reinforced by treating exclusionary curricular policy as an intersectional process—one that can structure power differentials in on-the-ground learning experiences and outcomes. Taking a historical institutionalist approach, I provide a case study of literacy policy development during the formation of federal accountability policy in PK-12 education. I focus on the shift to accountability because research has revealed the simultaneously gendered and racialized exclusion of individuals and communities under this paradigm. Much intersectional scholarship on accountability policy focuses on educational domains that are deemed non-academic, such as abstinence-only sexuality education (Fields, 2005) and disciplinary and carceral systems (Couvson, 2016; Noguera, 2009). By contrast, research on the

academic domains of accountability has largely separated race and gender. While scholars have begun to explain how race-neutral standards can reinforce the ideology of whiteness (Leonardo, 2007) and drive racialized inequities (McCambly & Mulroy, 2024), less understood are if and how heteronormativity and (cis)patriarchy operate in these processes (Harris & Leonardo, 2018).

As such, I focus on the development of literacy policy because it not only comprises a “core” academic project capturing broad reform ideas driving accountability, but also illuminates how racial and gender categories can be mutually constituted, albeit quietly or inexplicitly. For example, gender does not appear to constitute an axis of inequality under conceptions of equality as outputs (i.e., performance on verbal tests) and inputs (i.e., access). When examined relative to men’s educational access and outcomes, the extant measures of women’s access and outcomes do not look “worse,” and in many ways their achievement relative to men (within respective racial groups) under accountability can be said to reflect gains for equality. Yet, education scholarship on culturally responsive literacies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nicolazzo, 2023; Wozolek, 2021) highlights the value of, first, conceptualizing literacy as an identity-relevant communal and intergenerational learning practice extending beyond groups of male and female students, and second, evaluating equality through *learning experiences* beyond inputs and outputs.

In this study, I address three questions: (1) Under what conditions did policy actors link race and gender in the development of literacy policy? (2) Through what discursive processes did policy actors make these linkages, and to what end? (3) What meaning(s) of racial and gender “equality” drove the imperative to apply basic skills to literacy policy over other strategies? Using process tracing (Mahoney, 2015), I collect and analyze archival documents, from the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) in 1965 to the announcement of the *National Education Goals* proposed by President Bush and 49 governors in 1989. This time period is

bracketed by, first, the opening of a federal policy window to improve equality in literacy and, second, an official understanding of literacy as rooted in “basic skills” and a requirement of national citizenship in future generations. As I demonstrate, the policy texts underlying the shift to standards-based accountability policy — the Excellence Commission report *A Nation at Risk* (1983), Secretary Bennett’s humanities curriculum (1987), the Even Start Family Literacy program (1988), and *National Goals* (1989) — comprise a set of exclusionary outcomes that cannot be understood through race or gender alone but must be viewed intersectionally.

In my findings, I show that federal literacy policy during accountability narrowed from systemic protections for expansive literacy to socioeconomic mobility and respectability due to reformers’ sponsorship of a causal story explaining illiteracy. This tale of underperformance was woven with *deviance knots*, a rhetorical device that encompassed a primary and secondary linkage: first, between “deviant” families (including children) and schools under Great Society federal policy, and second, within these categories, between Blackness (or Brownness) and “unproductive” categories of gender, sexuality, and/or class. Through these two sets of linkages, deviance knots (a) *threaded national moral panics about educational achievement, heteronormative family life, and economic prosperity* and (b) *coded social identity categories to package a gendered racial narrative*: one that attributed blame for illiteracy and underperformance to poor Black and Brown families’ social and reproductive behavior as well as Great Society federal policy. Officially embedded into *A Nation at Risk* (1983), this story provided legitimacy to the “excellence” movement by unifying previously unaligned coalitions and underwrote reform toward “basic skills” and Black and Brown nuclear family uplift as twin foundations of accountability. Notably, this focus across coalitions on family mobility and

respectability led to standards that closed and obfuscated opportunities opened in the 1970s to dignify and embed Black and Brown families' communicative practices and family forms.

Literature Review

In this section, I review two bodies of scholarship on standards-based accountability in literacy: first, a largely non-gendered body of research that has begun to show how racial politics underlay a shift to standards-based accountability, and second, a body of sociocultural research in education that points to the gendered racial impacts of national literacy standards on students and families. This second body of research has begun to conceptualize such standards as the policy erasure of Black and (trans)gendered communicative practices. Together, these bodies of scholarship posit, but do not explain, a linkage between the standards-based reform movement beginning in the 1980s and the proliferation of racialized and gendered ideas about “literacy” and the gendered racial inequities experienced under the educational accountability paradigm. As such, I argue for the value of a historical-political analysis that traces the process, and mechanisms by which, literacy standards came to be both racialized and gendered.

The accountability paradigm in PK-12 education describes a nationalized framework of policies, which originated in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and crystallized in *No Child Left Behind* (2002), that have used content and performance standards to drive and assess quality schooling. The implementation of these standards has primarily been carried out through high-stakes testing of schools and students. Longstanding scholarship in educational politics has understood accountability through the turn toward a management-driven logic of efficiency given the economic and military imperatives of the Cold War (Mehta, 2013), and the outcome of political centrists and experts' purportedly neutral efforts to unify calls to improve both “equality” and “excellence” (McDermott, 2011). This literature points to the *Elementary and Secondary*

Education Act (1965) as a critical juncture generated by the Civil Rights Movement, one that opened up a federal policy window that paved the path to standards-based accountability (McGuinn, 2006). It highlights that, from 1965 to *No Child Left Behind* (2002), the federal education field underwent transformation characterized by two trends: first, efforts at strengthening the federal government's role in education, especially by sponsoring research, and second, normative or moral debates about aims and tools of "equality" in education.

Research has begun to pinpoint how racial politics lay at the heart of these moral debates. While much literature on the racial and economic politics of accountability has focused on the state or local level (e.g., Ewing, 2018; Nuamah, 2022), some scholars have examined how ostensibly race-neutral federal policy seeded the racialized ideologies that structured material outcomes for children and communities in these locales. McCambly & Mulroy (2024) develop a model of *(e)quality politics* that links such ostensibly race-neutral federal policy to racial inequities in institutional access to higher education. According to *(e)quality politics*, federal accountability policy embedded anti-Black bias through "quality" discourse and control mechanisms, which constituted a toolbox for backlash to civil rights gains. This analysis traces how, after the election of Reagan to president in 1980, the character of federal reforms shifted rightward through an emphasis on educational "quality," or "excellence," which was positioned as a direct, zero-sum contrast to racial equality in institutional access. Notably, much of this scholarship mentions gender — whether in passing references to Title IX, descriptions of moral panic about sex and sexuality that co-occurred with the shift to accountability (Zimmerman, 2022), or characterizations of the education field as "feminized" (Mehta, 2013) — but does not interrogate these linkages between gender, race, and standards-based accountability.

Yet, a body of sociocultural research in education has illustrated the gendered racial impacts of national literacy governance. One strand within this scholarship has found fieldwide deficit assumptions about Black and Brown families, particularly mothers, to constitute a harmful outcome of federal standards. While much literature has explained that purported goals for equality in literacy policy were undermined by racial biases in standardized approaches to language (Cole, 2013; McDermott et al., 2008; Rosa & Flores, 2017), some scholars have conceptualized these racial biases as inextricably linked to gender biases through the construct of maternal literacy, or a “mother tongue” (Baker-Bell, 2020; Smitherman, 2022). Especially during the spread of family literacy programs that sought to use “basic skills” to improve families’ socioeconomic mobility, including the federal enactment of the Even Start Family Literacy program (1988), research has illuminated the affordances of Black and Brown mothers’ literacy practices and identified the biases embedded in family literacy programs (Gadsden, 1992). In particular, by connecting biases against African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to scrutiny of mothers’ literacy, this work has illuminated the simultaneous invocation of race and gender in scholarly and popular accounts that attribute racial and socioeconomic inequality in children’s and adults’ education to maternal illiteracy. This strand of sociocultural research on literacy points to the salience of gendered ideas about Black and Brown families in understanding racial inequities produced by federal programs and standards.

A related strand of sociocultural research has uncovered the gendered racial impact of standards-based accountability policy on students, in the form of standardized literacy and humanities curriculum. This research suggests, but without a clear causal mechanism, that deficit or damage-centered perceptions of boys and girls of color, as well as queer and trans Black and Brown youth and communities, have shaped the political development of standardized

humanities curriculum (Gilbert et al., 2018). Ethnographic research on students' experiences has found that both unequal representation and derogatory stereotypes in curricular texts and approaches have made PLK-12 literacy and literature curriculum a site of exclusion (A.A. Ferguson, 2001; Blackburn, 2005; Schey, 2020). This scholarship examines how literacy standards overlook the intellectual and affective resources of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children and families, especially working-class and women-led families, and queer and trans children and families (Baker-Bell, 2020; Pritchard, 2016). Education researchers offer that racial harm via standardized curriculum occurs due to policy elites' willful inattention to and elision of racialized and (trans)gendered ways of being and learning (Ewing, 2025; Nicolazzo, 2023).

Scholars have begun to conceptualize policy erasure as a political tool that contributes to structural inequities based on systems of race and gender. Policy erasure refers to elites' active construction of barriers either to helpful, dignifying information about marginalized people and experiences, or to accessible and inclusive institutional infrastructure, namely "policies, procedures, or practices [that] meet the specific needs" of minoritized people (McQuillan et al., 2024, p. 8; Bauer et al., 2009). This formal construction of informational or institutional barriers serves not only to exclude but also to invisibilize and de-legitimize a marginalized group (Crenshaw, 1988; McQuillan & Mayo, 2023; Namaste, 2000). Research on the policy erasure of transgender communities in schools has highlighted the possibility for intersectional concerns to motivate policy erasure: when state legislative bills intend to remove or prevent LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, these efforts are tied to campaigns to remove or prevent the teaching of Critical Race Theory (McQuillan et al., 2024). But while research indicates policy erasure duly implicates race and gender, it does not indicate when, why, and how.

As such, I argue for the value of an intersectional and developmental analysis to understand the long-term processes by which racial and gender biases can become linked and embedded into standards-based policies governing the field. I posit that a historical-political analysis of policy constructions of children and families can help uncover the relationship between (cis)patriarchy and heteronormativity on the one hand, and anti-Black and Brown bias on the other hand, in processes driving deficit-based family literacy programs and exclusionary curriculum. This approach is consistent with work across humanities and the social sciences (e.g., Cooper, 2017; Gill-Peterson, 2015) that suggests we can look *through* racial politics to uncover the operation of gender and understand how racial and gender categories have been mutually constructed in ways that reinforce structural hierarchies in and beyond education.

Theoretical Framework

To develop a conceptual model of how and why racial and gender identities can become linked within the political development of exclusionary literacy standards, I bridge concepts from politics, sociology, education, queer theory, and Black Feminisms. First, I explain why I treat U.S. literacy education governance as a gendered racial project of nation-building. This project has implicated children and families as target populations and involved the spread and stick of gendered racial ideas of language and literacy. Second, to understand the inner-workings of this project, I highlight how ideas about (il)literacy can become a policy discourse of deficiency and deviance wherein (a) national moral panics about education can become linked to panics about family and economic well-being and (b) official depictions of culpable and victim populations can link racial and gender identities. This framework opens a window into how causal narratives and reform solutions can be built on racial and gender categories, gain political legitimacy, and become woven into policy texts in ostensibly race- and gender-neutral ways.

Building on empirical research in comparative politics on the “anti-democratic roots” of PK-12 education (Paglayan, 2021), and on the role of language as a primary mechanism of nationalism (Anderson, 1983), I understand federal governance of literacy education as a nation-building project. In this project, federal officials employ and entwine “family/community” and “school/curriculum” as symbolic cultural categories and material institutions of resource delivery through which to raise “children/students,” or “proto-citizens” (Mayo, 2006), and realize a national future (Edelman, 2004). Through constructing “family/community” “school/curriculum” and “child/student” to shape national identity and distribute resources (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), officials draw *normative or moral boundaries* amidst diverse, dynamic possibilities for these categories (Bey, 2022; Whatcott, 2021).

Following empirical work in PK-12 education, I argue that U.S. literacy education governance has exemplified what education researcher Barcelos (2018) has conceptualized as a *gendered racial project*: a site “in which race and gender interact to structure social meanings, experiences, and inequalities in ways that are so entrenched they often go unremarked” (p. 254). While Barcelos developed this concept to describe sexuality education policy, I apply it to literacy education — what is understood as an academic domain and so treated as “neutral” or purely “scientific” and data-driven (Aydarova, 2023), and has thus gone “unremarked.” Barcelos’ theory of a gendered racial project draws from sociologists Omi and Winant’s (2015) notion of racial projects, or coordinated efforts at the institutional or field level, that articulate, formalize, and disseminate racial classification schemes in ways that stratify the delivery of benefits to one racial group over another. This means that racialized constructs can become embedded in cultural environments and then used to structure organizations and institutions. Literacy education has been a foremost racial project throughout the history of the U.S. (Ewing,

2025; Givens, 2021). The denial of literacy education to enslaved people and sharecroppers, as well as the use of literacy tests to restrict access to voting, has meant that national literacy policy has helped to (re)construct racial identity (Black, 2025). Scholars have highlighted, without causal mechanisms, gendered components of this racialization process. Namely, Black families' literacy practices have been systematically overlooked and devalued (Bey, 2022; Gadsden, 1992). I suggest that conceiving of U.S. literacy policy as a gendered racial project attunes us to normative and peripheral ideas of literacy embedded in constructions of (il)literacy and humanities standards, unsettling a “neutral” or “scientific” perception of academic policy.

Key to Barcelos' development of gendered racial projects is the finding that race and gender identities intersect in essentialist narratives about racialized reproductive behavior. From this work on gendered racial narratives, I treat policy narratives of illiteracy and underperformance as *causal stories* of educational decline (Stone, 1989) that characterize policy discourse surrounding and informing policy texts (Ball, 1993). Causal stories embed ideas and images that help policy actors to construct more vividly the population (or system) of “blame” and the population of “victims.” For the purpose of this study, the construction of a “crisis in education” (Mehta, 2013) by officials and researchers meant that they had to put forward an explanation that “blamed one set of people [or systems] for causing the suffering of others” (Stone, 1989, p. 283). These stories' “empirical and moral claims” can naturalize normative ideas and identities and create legitimacy for policy erasure (Stone, 1989, p. 283). It is within this process of attributing blame and victimhood to different types of “family/community,” “children/students,” and “school/curriculum” that federal officials and policy actors can mobilize and mutually constitute racial and gender identity categories. While moral policy discourse is not inherently intersectional, research in social policy (Nuamah & Mulroy, 2023; Roberts, 1997) has

highlighted the salience of gendered racial biases in evaluations of culpability and victimhood. As such, I argue that causal stories explaining illiteracy and underperformance can be driven by or developed under conditions of moral panic, or perceived threats to the nation (Cohen, 2010; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Importantly, while moral panics about educational underperformance and family structure are not inherently linked, conceiving of literacy education governance as a gendered racial project illuminates how education reformers could link moral panics about education and family structure. Specifically, by examining how reformers' causal stories erected dividing lines between achievement and respectability on one side, and deficiency and deviance on the other (Cohen, 2004; Hill Collins, 2006, 2009; Nash, 2019; Spillers, 1987), I create opportunities to see more clearly *how* moral panic can inform officials' boundary-drawing around "family," "school" and "child." to shape national identity and distribute resources. Examining discourses of deviance and deficiency highlights who is understood to need what reforms, and why. This takes up Hartman's provocation (1997/2022) to interrogate the "economy of racial production" under structural liberalism—that is, after transitions to putative legal equality (i.e., after *Brown v. Board* in 1954 and *ESEA* and the Voting Rights Act in 1965). Attuning to policy discourses of deficiency and deviance in education governance creates openings to notice how constructs of not only race and gender, but also class and sexuality, can serve as discursive commodities in the (re)production of race and racial hierarchy.

Methods

Taking a historical case studies approach to the collection and analysis of archival data, I conduct an "in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40; Yin, 2009). This study of national literacy policy illuminates a sequence of "fundamental structural

causes” (Pierson, 2005, p. 42) of exclusionary schooling. This “long-term” view of reform, through which I trace political discourse on literacy and achievement from *ESEA* in 1965 to *NCLB* in 2002, identifies mechanistic linkages between *A Nation at Risk*, *National Education Goals*, and *NCLB* and contrasts with “snapshot” studies of the individual enactment and effects of accountability policies. In particular, I use process tracing to identify possible explanations of the policy erasure of Black, Latina, and Indigenous women and queer communities encapsulated in *National Education Goals* (later codified in *NCLB*), and to test which contributing condition(s) and mechanism(s) were jointly necessary and sufficient (Mahoney, 2015, p. 203).

While collecting data at six archival sites, I identified and photo-copied evidence of the process by which literacy debates unfolded into legislation via academic research, policy reports, speeches, meeting remarks, private correspondences and hearings from *ESEA* to *NCLB* (Ball, 1993). To date, I have constructed an archival dataset of 2,140 documents across these sites. Table 2 includes information about the sites and size of this corpus. I have devised a timeline of influential events (Figure 1) and a roster of key actors, which I used to map how political and ideological coalitions unified, fragmented, and transfigured over time. Primarily, I trace the thinking of five groups of policy actors’ whose ideas made them agents of material change: (1) *social science researchers*; this group includes those who worked at research institutions, such as Brookings, American Enterprise, Urban Institute, Heritage Foundation, Ford Foundation; central to this group was the Excellence in Education Network (EEN), founded by Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch in 1981¹; (2) *federal officials*; this group includes presidents and members of the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), the National Institute of Education (founded in 1972), and

¹ I focus on Finn and Ravitch as key architects due not only to their coordination of a wide-ranging political network but also due to their rise to power as Assistant Secretaries of Education in the 1980s and 1990s. During and after their positions in the Department of Education, Finn and Ravitch were influential in fighting states’ textbook adoption process, which aimed to use state guidelines to eliminate bias in literacy textbooks.

the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which published *A Nation at Risk*; (3) *legislators* in Congress who spearheaded debates on education policy issues such as the establishment of the DOE, desegregation policy, and curricular reform, including literacy education; (4) *journalists* at influential newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *New York Times*; and (5) *education activists*; this group includes movements for equality (e.g., Feminist Party, National Organization for Women, and National Black Feminist Organization) and professional groups (National Council of Teachers of English).

To interpret my data, I use critical political discourse analysis (CPDA) of policy actors' framing of problems and solutions (Fairclough, 2013). CPDA treats policy not as prearranged, bounded documents but as historical processes shaped by relations of power and constructed through language (Hyatt, 2013, p. 5; Ball, 1993). In my first round of analytic memoing, I identified the range of influential reformers' "causal stories" of educational decline and solutions for reform related to literacy and achievement. In identifying what documents to include in my analysis, I focused on discourse related to literacy alongside academic achievement broadly, which meant including data that focused on verbal test scores; reading, writing, language arts, and the humanities; and basic literacy, family literacy, cultural literacy. I did not include data that focused on math test scores, non-humanities subjects, special education, or bilingual education.² Through this identification of various narratives and reform solutions, I was able to generate possible explanations for educational accountability reform and triangulate these explanations with those provided by the extant research in educational politics. To "test" these explanations and their underlying mechanistic factors, I applied my conceptual framework of literacy

² These decisions for exclusion criteria are not meant to suggest that these subjects and topics were not important in shaping education reform discourse; in fact, topics such as special education and bilingual education may reveal important linkages (e.g., dis/ability, citizenship) to gendered racial policy-making in federal education governance. In that sense, these exclusion criteria highlight limitations of this study. I chose not to include these subjects and topics, however, to narrow the scope of this study to focus on literacy reform and reflect ways "literacy" was being defined in relation to achievement.

education governance as a gendered racial project of nation-building. In particular, I paid attention to how policy actors constructed “children,” “family,” and “school” (i.e., curriculum, teachers and administrators) in their warrants for literacy reform and legitimations for given solutions. In a second round of analysis, I attended to how race and gender co-occurred in their depictions of children, families, and schools. In what follows, I show how the policy erasure embedded in standards-based literacy reform can be explained only by accounting for depictions of rising illiteracy that included race alongside gender and the family.

Context

Central to Great Society reform in education were at least two developments. One was the creation by Education Commissioner Francis Keppel (1962-1965) of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which became known as “The Nation’s Report Card,” and first administered in 1969. This standardized assessment allowed states and the federal government to understand and compare student performance on verbal tests. The second development was the publication of a controversial corollary report to *ESEA* titled *The Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966), commonly referred to as the Coleman Report after its author, Johns Hopkins sociologist James S. Coleman. Stipulated by the 1964 Civil Rights Act to assess the “lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions,” the Coleman Report found that despite racially segregated schools, school-based resources were not responsible for differential outcomes between white and Black students. Instead, the Report concluded that “whatever may be the combination of non-school factors—poverty, community attitudes, low educational level of parents—which put minority children at a disadvantage in verbal and nonverbal skills when they enter first grade, the fact is the schools have not overcome it” (p. 21).

Using the composite of individual students' performance on reading tests to evaluate student outcomes by racial group, the Coleman Report argued that equal opportunity was best understood as equal outputs of the educational process — a position that was embraced by many social scientists of education in the 1970s but not embedded in federal policy until the 1980s (*Mosteller & Moynihan, 1972*).

Findings

Throughout the 1970s racial and gender equality activists often worked together for systemic reform toward inclusive literacy curriculum and experienced some policy successes. Yet, depictions of children and families in social scientific research and media that tangled constructions of Blackness with “unproductive” class, gender, and/or sexuality categories exposed fissures in these movements for educational inclusion. As national moral panics about racial desegregation and educational achievement, reproductive behavior, economic productivity intensified after Reagan's election, education reformers opposed to the egalitarian goals and systemic reforms of liberation movements tied and tightened deviance knots (Figure 2) to interweave these moral panics, thereby acquiring political legitimacy and forming new interracial solidarities. Between 1981 and 1983, the “excellence” movement took shape among scholars and policymakers through storytelling that explained declining literacy and achievement by citing moral decay in schools and the linked roles of parental behavior and federal policy in this purported degradation. Specifically, deviance knots offered a toolkit of discursive shorthand for sewing a coded narrative of poor Black and Brown families' “irresponsibility” to children and the nation, which spread and set the stage for scholarly and policy litigation over how to support and “uplift” Black and Brown mothers, fathers, and children. Alongside curricular reform toward “basic literacy,” *A Nation at Risk* (1983) formalized family reform as a goal of national education

policy. Influential research reports, private correspondences, editorials, and speeches indicate that family reform targeted a growing “underclass” of women-led households as a source of declining achievement and a site of needed intervention. Key policy texts drove the enactment of assimilative reading standards, which ignored and restricted knowledge by and about Black and Brown women and invisibilized queer, or “unrespectable,” communities altogether (Table 3).

1972-1981: Precarious Successes for Inclusive Literacy Policy Under Great Society Reforms

After the passage of Title IX (1972) and the declassification of homosexuality³ by the American Psychological Association (1973), advocates for racial and gender equality fought to use humanities textbook reform as an important tool to challenge gender norms⁴ and hierarchies in families, and to express solidarity between social movements for equality (e.g., *National Council of Teachers of English*, 1974). These efforts were clear, for instance, in a guidebook by the PK-6 publisher Scott, Foresman and Company called “Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks” (1972, 1974). The guidebook explained that writers and publishers should “avoid constructions implying that women, because they are women, are always dependent on male initiative.” In one example provided, the guidebook offered the sentence, “Slaves tried to maintain family relationships, but the laws did not recognize slave marriages” as a “possible alternative” to the sexist language in “A slave could not claim his wife or children as his own because the law did not recognize slave marriages. This example revealed campaigns mounted

³ Scholars have observed the trans panic that ensued from in the aftermath of this removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (in 1980, Gender Identity Dysphoria was *added* to the DSM). This meant that between 1973 and 1980, categories around gender and sexuality existed without concrete officialized boundaries at the very time that individuals, including children, began to receive care for gender transition processes from scientists and physicians at elite academic institutions (Gill-Peterson, 2018).

⁴Some leading scholars in federal education reform were aware of (and erased) young people’s gender transition processes. In 1968, James S. Coleman (of the Coleman Report) reviewed a study by Harold Garfinkel in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967) in which Garfinkel describes his interview with the seventeen-year-old Agnes, whom Garfinkel recognized as a woman in his writing while also noting she had a penis and was considered by many at the time to be a “male transvestite.” In reviewing Garfinkel’s piece, Coleman dismissed the study nearly entirely, in large part because he claimed that Garfinkel was “fooled” by this teenager. Coleman wrote that, “A male needs a female to fulfill his sexual interests and to act as a spouse in everyday life; a female needs a male for the very same purposes” (p. 128).

by equity advocates to use textbook reform to educate children about the historical harms of sexism and racism together. This spotlight on the intersection of sexism and racism opened up opportunities to consider the historical and legal construction of the normative “family” via the institution of marriage. These openings in curriculum emerged from joint efforts by women’s organizations and Black, Brown, and Indigenous community activists to target literacy policy (e.g., *Antell, 1978; Shaw, 1975*).

At the same time that educators and activists sought to implement an inclusive curriculum via guidebooks for textbook reform, they also worked to de-standardize literacy practices. This reform strategy came on the heels of racially progressive scholarship that reiterated the “logic of non-standard English” (*Labov, 1970*) amidst the “beaucoup socio-linguistic research studies” that scrutinized Black literacy practices (*Smitherman, 1973*). Ideas about gender and the family were central to these debates. Key linguists such as Columbia and Penn’s William Labov and Harvard’s Geneva Smitherman⁵ defended against deficit approaches to literacy characterized by gendered discourses about “matri-focal” “lower-class” communities, as opposed to “working-class families” where the “nuclear family was intact” (*Labov, 1970*). These Moynihan-style “culture of poverty” criticisms of the literacy practices of “disadvantaged” Black communities elevated home life as a source of under-achievement and a site of needed intervention via schooling (*Lewis, 1966*). In a 1974 resolution, the NCTE

⁵ In her book *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977), Smitherman criticized the increasing use of national reading tests as tools for evaluation: “Because of the demonstrated cultural and linguistic biases of standardized tests, all tools of national educational assessment should be carefully screened and even then only used with the greatest amount of caution and discretion. These tests completely disregard the experience and culture of minority persons. Such tests after all, which are invalid in the first place, serve only to track (“trap” is a better word for it) students forever into a fixed slot in the school and later in the social world. I would here recommend that teachers follow the lead of a number of black and other concerned professionals who have called for a national moratorium on all testing until valid measurements are devised and policies instituted to prevent misuse of tests. For example, here is the statement adopted by the Association of Black Psychologists: “The Association of Black Psychologists fully supports those parents who have chosen to defend their rights by refusing to allow their children and themselves to be subjected to achievement, intelligent, aptitude tests which have been used to a) label Black people as uneducable.... Another professional organization which supports this position and philosophy is the National Education Association.

“affirm[ed] the students’ right to their own language—to the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity.” The NCTE’s inclusion of potential individual, family, and community identities revealed a belief in using pedagogy about literacy to challenge the singularity of identity; that is, the NCTE resolution called on educators and policymakers to create the conditions in which students could bring multiple layers of identity into a classroom. It made room for intersections of racial and gender identities and for students’ ongoing construction of their identities.⁶

The development of a moral panic in literacy was shaped by popular anxieties about systemic reforms for educational equality during the Great Society, namely two policies: federal protections for expansive curriculum and federally mandated racial desegregation (*Hoppe, 1974*). Central to these criticisms of Great Society education reform was the effort to define literacy through the concept of “functional literacy,” as distinct from the capacity to read. In a National Public Radio panel interview on “Illiteracy in the United States: Options on Education” in 1974, Mike Smith, the Director of Essential Skills at the National Institute of Education, argued that, “functional literacy attacks the notion of whether or not children can deal with society, whether or not children and adults can deal with society. Whether or not they can look at the kinds of printed materials that are necessary for them to deal successfully, to cope” (*George Washington University Institute for Educational Leadership*). This discourse equating children’s long-term social success with assimilative learning distinguished functional literacy not only from oral

⁶ Ravitch’s files also contained the debate over Open Court Publishing Company’s decision to feminize an engine in its textbook to abide by California state requirements for textbook adoption. In a *Chicago Tribune* opinion piece in August 1976 titled “Little Engine Gets a Sex Change; Call Her Enginea,” education writer Casey Banas relied on transphobic rhetoric to criticize the publishing company’s choice. In response, Open Court President M. Blouke Carus drew on feminist ideas of de-naturalizing gender: “[T]he truth is that the kind of justice we all seek will never be done unless states like California and Illinois take the lead and publishers like Open Court take the risk of revisiting their materials in ways that have not been tried before. Locomotives have no natural gender; why should Banas or anyone else find the idea of a female locomotive ridiculous but that of a male locomotive unremarkable?” (HDR063).

traditions, but also from any non-dominant literacy practices. Smith framed functional literacy as a “critical problem” within the broader effort to create “equality of opportunity,” arguing that “the problem of reading now lies with economically disadvantaged populations.” Throughout the 1970s, conservative appeals to the inclusion of “street slang” and “non-traditional” roles in a “complex society” as hindrances to literacy (*Bell, 1978; Hale, 1980; Jackson, 1978*) applied pressure on Black communities and women’s and gay and trans liberation organizations to choose between assimilative literacy practices and the promise of social mobility, or authentic literacy and the refusal of economic uplift through education. In repeated responses to these conservative claims, leading literacy scholars, publishers, and activists demonstrated that incorporating “Black Idiom” and African American Vernacular English and challenging gender stereotyping aligned with current research on effective literacy (e.g., *Smitherman, 1977*).

While conservatives’ interlacing of reproductive pathologies in literacy reform provided a playbook for education scholars leading the “excellence” charge, the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed some, if fragile, important legal successes for liberatory movements’ advocacy of inclusive literacy practices. In the federal court case *Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District* (1979), Judge Charles W. Joiner found that the Ann Arbor School District violated federal law by not embedding learning practices that recognized Black English as the “home language” of the plaintiffs. The judge stipulated that the district take action to support the learning pathways of the plaintiffs. Moreover, in the very same month that Secretary Bell announced the Excellence Commission, the California State Department of Education (a state where many textbooks were published) came out with a document called “Interim Guidelines for Evaluation of Instructional Materials With Respect to Social Content” that linked racial and gender inclusion in the curriculum. In particular, it stipulated that

instructional materials in elementary school classrooms had to cast “various occupations and various lifestyles—marriage, remaining single, raising children or not doing so...in an affirmative light” (*Riles, 1981*). However limited, these decisions by courts, textbook publishers, and state education boards created potential openings and protections for the inclusion of Black women’s and “non-traditional” community knowledge and family forms in schools.

Moral Panics about Racialized Reproductive Behavior Creeps into Education

By the mid-1970s, the divisive impact of moral panic about racialized reproductive behavior on the education activism of many Black community leaders became evident. As a key example, in 1975 Reverend Jesse Jackson of the former Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded the “Push for Excellence” (PUSH-EXCEL) program, for which he received funding by the National Institute of Education to speak at schools around the nation. In his speeches and interviews, Jackson criticized a “politics of decadence” and the “diversionary” ills of alcohol, drugs, and lack of discipline as obstacles to racial equality (*Jackson qtd. in Cole, 1977*). One of Jackson’s comments to his audiences in speeches across the country, which was reiterated in a *Phi Delta Kappan* portrait of PUSH-EXCEL, was that Black girls “have fully developed bottoms and half developed brains.” The goal for Jackson’s program was to encourage students to “use [their] minds;” for according to the article, the reason why “blacks [were] so good at basketball and football and not so good at reading and math” was due to insufficient “practice” and “drills” (*Cole, 1977*). In a 1979 article in *The New York Times*, Yale psychologist James Comer praised Jackson as “the kind of authority figure that our society has lost. He is challenging [Black students], and they need and want that challenge” (*Comer qtd. in Fiske, 1979*). The bundling of Blackness with reproductive pathologies by Black advocates for racial equity positioned the perceived loss of “authority” and family values as an especially acute

problem in Black communities. This moral, character-based approach to equity in education sowed division within Black activists who focused on systemic reforms such as desegregation policy. For example, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm led a charge to obstruct the proposed new federal Department of Education, for which Jesse Jackson provided the first testimony (*Fiske, 1979*). The basis of Chisholm's criticism was the Department's "inadequate mechanisms to guarantee compliance with the Federal Law [the *Brown* decision]" ("Black Group Fights Plan on Education," *The New York Times*, August 1978). Emphasizing systemic change, Chisholm supported a proposal for a strengthened Office of Civil Rights and formed coalitions with groups like the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and AFL-CIO.

Scrutiny of young Black women's sexual behavior as possible causes of educational decline among the "disadvantaged" became a central driving force in social science research geared toward supporting women and children in the 1970s. As a key example, in an Urban Institute study (1975) titled *Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women*, economists Heather Ross and Isabel Sawhill synthesized recent U.S. Census data with other studies to investigate how and why there was an increasing number of households without a father, and what this meant for U.S. policy and society. In their report, Ross and Sawhill conceptualized this as a racialized problem. They posited that young Black women became mothers because, more so than young white women, they engaged in sex without knowledge of the "basic biological facts relating to conception." Ross and Sawhill framed Black girls' sexuality as a source of family decline by linking a rise in "illegitimacy" with divorce, separation, and "marital instability among nonwhites." In their later chapters, Ross and Sawhill examined the short- and long-term outcomes of children in such "broken" homes (*p. 145*). Ross and Sawhill crafted a story about generational cycles of poverty that not only linked "family

instability” to “juvenile delinquency” and “children’s success in school,” but also identified a mechanism: “the quality of home life—how appropriately parents related to each other and to children” (*p. 136*). Notably, test scores on standardized literacy assessments formed a basis of conceptualizations of “children’s success in school.” While Ross and Sawhill raised sex education as a remedy for supporting women and children and breaking cycles of poverty, their reliance on research about Black families’ behavioral patterns helped to concretize racially coded deficit language under the guise of science.

A slate of demographic research on Black families across policy think tanks in the 1970s helped to legitimize reform of Black families as a goal across education policy debates. For instance, future Reagan-appointed National Council for Education Research member Onalee McGraw wrote a 1978 Heritage Report report advocating for school vouchers. Using the racially coded discourse of “inner-city families,” she framed the children of single Black mothers as a source of reproductive trouble and a threat to “caring” families: “Inner-city families, many of them single parent households, must send their children into schools in which drugs and violence are a fact of life.” Then, she argued, “It is precisely the children of families who care about their education and who exercise authority to send them to school who suffer a grave injustice” (*p. 32*). As such, anti-Black and anti-feminist research that applied logics of protection and paternalism proved to be an intellectual breeding ground of arguments for “excellence” of the 1980s. In other words, this racialized scrutiny of family behavior by women social scientists demonstrated how the racialization of reproductive panic could undermine the Great Society paradigm of education reform by (a) de-legitimizing efforts at systemic transformation and (b) applying moral pressure on Black communities to “straighten up” and conform. Across education policy debates, racialized deficit assumptions about Black mothers by white women

social scientists laid the groundwork for “excellence” stories of declining literacy and achievement that blamed a loss of family “order” and “authority.”

The political efficacy of bringing gendered racial panic into education became especially clear in on-the-ground activism of Christian parents against textbook reform. Christian parents across racial coalitions became united around indictments of “secular (or atheistic) humanism.” Throughout the 1970s, religious parents positioned textbooks and instructional materials that opened up opportunities to question the sanctity of the nuclear family as threats to their values. For example, in a 1978 petition, Minnesota parents Ron Miller and Joe Egan took issue with the entirety of the newly written Grade 3 Holt Basic Reading System book *Never Give Up*:

“You are hereby notified that Mary Jane Miller is not allowed by the undersigned to participate in, be subject to, or instructed in any training or education in; sex and/or sexual attitudes, the theory of evolution unless it is equally balanced with the creationist’s facts and viewpoint, attitude change or development including role reversal, medication, interpersonal questioning, psycho-drama (role playing), introspective examination of social and cultural aspects of family life, group therapy or ‘group criticism’ of self, family, or Christian values, T grouping and all forms of sensitivity training, situation ethics, the Occult, the undermining of Christianity including school curricula that contains blasphemy and/or profanity, Eastern Mysticism practices and exercises of all of its derivatives (Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, etc.), the teaching and/or the comparison of religions, or any combination or degree thereof, without the consent of the undersigned by express written and signed permission.”

While this criticism of textbook reform is not overtly racialized, this avoidance of explicit anti-Blackness speaks volumes. This evasion of overt race and racism enabled a budding convergence between the Christian Right and the Respectable Left—a convergence opened up by moral panic about the family. In the political context of Reaganite discourse about the “welfare queen” (1976-1980), the amplification of panic around the family proved a strategy to win adherents on the Christian Right, who believed in abstinence and monoracial heteronormative family structure; leading policy-makers who sought to strengthen the

productivity of the nation-state; leaders of the Respectable Left who labored to improve the wellbeing and socioeconomic status of Black and Brown communities and women.

In the late 1970s, immediately preceding her establishment of the Educational Excellence Network, education historian Diane Ravitch corresponded with elite academics who appealed to gendered racial panic to express their discontent with Great Society education reform. For example, Harvard sociologist of education David Riesman wrote to Ravitch that young white women's academic under-achievement in literacy was due to their engagement in "diversionary" social ills: "[W]hat is true of the lower-class blacks is now becoming true of lower-middle-class whites as well. I interpret the test score results...with a focus on the far sharper drop in women's verbal scores without any rise of their quantitative scores. This seems to me to reflect the fact that, while it was always difficult for a girl in school to be a 'brain,' it is impossible to be a 'brain' when one's lover is not and when one is engaging in pharmacological experiments with him" (*Riesman, 1980*). This example of a deviance knot discredited desegregation policy based on its purported failure to support the success of white women. Riesman's words also underscored fear of a racialized power shift *via* education: In the aftermath of the Coleman Report, what became the "excellence" network of reformers largely believed in desegregation to support the assimilation of Black and/or working-class communities through proximity to white middle class values. Now, however, Riesman noted that white women were succumbing to the guiles of the "often manipulative Black male." According to Riesman, racial proximity via desegregation was not the path to equity for (white) women in education, and worse, it jeopardized the integrity of the (monoracial) nuclear family. In January 1981 Ravitch received a letter from a Northwestern professor, who observed a shift in unwed mothers from "rural" young women who "demonstrated extraordinary courage and maturity" in the 1960s to "urban" young

women who “demonstrate laziness, irresponsibility, and immaturity,” lamenting that this immorality was spawned by movements for equality and excessive Great Society legislation.

1981-1983: “Excellence” Reformers Gain Legitimacy

Between the summer of 1981 and spring of 1983, the “excellence” movement crystallized through its sponsorship of a story of family moral decay in explanations of declining literacy and achievement, which helped shape its advocacy of academic standards. In 1981, President Reagan initially dismissed the idea for the commission that developed *A Nation at Risk*. The Excellence Commission was the brainchild of Secretary of Education T.H. Bell, former Utah commissioner of higher education and LDS Church member, who received harsh criticism from Reagan’s right-wing supporters upon his appointment for his belief in public education (*Buckley, Jr., 1981*). After securing funds for the Commission in the summer of 1981, Bell made a concerted effort to bring together a bipartisan coalition across a range of positions in education in order for the nation to collectively rally behind public education (*Bell, 1988*). He selected colleague, friend, and fellow member of the LDS Church, President of the University of Utah David Pierpont Gardner, to serve as Chairman. Of the other 17 members (13 of whom were men) besides Gardner, there were three college and university presidents, two professors, one CEO, one governor, one former Commissioner of Education, one State School Board president, one superintendent, one school board president, five elementary and secondary school association presidents, and one teacher. Over its 18 month existence, the Commission read over 30 commissioned papers by educational “experts” and listened to or read the testimonies of over 250 administrators, teachers, students, parents, business leaders, and public officials through panels, symposia and national or regional hearings (*Excellence Commission, 1983*).

Officials Thread Moral Panics in Education, Family, and Economy

By the time that Secretary Bell called for the Excellence Commission, young women's sexual behavior had emerged on the national stage as a hypervisible cause for concern among scholars and policymakers interested in literacy and achievement (*Vinovskis, 1987*). For example, the question of sex education featured centrally in the debate over whether to establish a Department of Education (1978-1979), as many who favored an abstinence-only approach argued that a new Department of Education could advance sex education, and with it, a "gay agenda." While these activists for abstinence-only education lost the battle to block the new federal department, their efforts were rewarded in the passage of federal funding for such programming through the *Adolescent Family Life Act* in February 1981, soon after Reagan took office. Leading the passage of this legislation was Utah Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, the most vocal supporter of Bell during his appointment as education secretary. One exemplary article on Bell's desk during the time he fought to establish an Excellence Commission, titled "Teen Pregnancy: Nation Faces Devastating Problem" (*Chicago Tribune, 1981*), stated that the number of sexually active teenagers increased by two-thirds in the previous decade. The article cited a recent Stanford Research Institute study that reasoned that "just those babies born to American teenagers in 1978 would cost taxpayers \$8 billion a year in medical and welfare costs." Across Bell's files, media and research positioned the teenager's body as a public concern because it carried the potential to drain American taxpayers.

In Secretary Bell's August 1981 announcement of the Commission, he linked this economic panic to educational decline and illiteracy: "[N]o one can deny that the past decade has seen a diminution of standards. We know that far too many of our students are not measuring up to their potential or levels of excellence. The high level of functional illiterates among our young, particularly among minorities, is a perverse form of discrimination against those who,

without a good basic education, may never succeed as productive citizens in the competitive world of work.” Though silent on sexuality, this racialization of panic around economic productivity enabled the “excellent” movement’s advocacy of reform toward “basic education” as a way to “help” poor Black and Brown communities “succeed as productive citizens.” In other words, he framed literacy reform toward basic skills as a way to help break cycles of poverty. This problem frame helped to legitimize a conditional approach to achieving citizenship through education, whereby acceptance into the nation’s “Learning Society” (as the Excellence Commission would coin it in “A Nation at Risk”) hinged on acceptance of assimilative learning toward future economic productivity.

Literacy test scores would be an oft-repeated justification for the Excellence Commission’s research focus on social changes that occurred during the Great Society.⁷ Indeed, one of the six public goals that Bell established for the Excellence Commission magnified this narrative of national decline: “to assess how major social changes in the last quarter century have affected student achievement and the schools” (*Bell, 1981*). This particular research goal, which would be repeated in public forums by Commission Chair David Gardner, helped to bring together elite officials and scholars like Bell and Coleman, who had advocated for desegregation since the Coleman Report, and Reaganites, who advocated for privatization via vouchers. The Excellence Commission, and literacy reform toward “excellence,” resulted from a shared assumption that “social changes” since the mid-1950s were responsible for decline.

Understanding these “social changes” became the focus of scholarship throughout the 1980s.

“Excellence” Reformers Sew Deviance Knots into Causal Narrative of Decline

⁷ Two days after Bell announced the Excellence Commission in August 1981, he delivered an address to the Education Commission of the States. An interstate agency founded in 1965 to connect educational research to policy-making and state policymakers to one another, the ECS administered the Nation Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which provided Bell with much of the data he used as a warrant for the Excellence Commission (*Bell, 1981*). In his speech to the ECS, Bell reasoned that, “In our great scramble to provide equal opportunity and access to education we have witnessed a general decline in the literacy and academic competence of our students.”

Weeks after Secretary Bell's establishment of the Excellence Commission and while forming the EEN alongside Ravitch, Vanderbilt education policy professor Finn captured public malaise about education and harnessed interest in "excellence" in his *Change* magazine article, "Toward a New Consensus." Previously working with Moynihan when he was an advisor to Nixon and later appointed Secretary of Education under Reagan in 1985, Finn identified the Excellence Commission as an opportunity for the so-called "Reagan Revolution" to overturn the "Liberal Consensus" in education. Finn pinpointed an educational tug-of-war, first spelled out by Adelson in a *Commentary* article published earlier that year:

"[There is a] conflict within the schools between the traditional values that most American parents wish imparted to their children- values such as 'merit, accomplishment, competition, and success; self-restraint, self-discipline, and the postponement of gratification; the stability of the family; and a belief in certain moral universals'- and a modernist ethos that 'scorns the pursuit of success; is egalitarian and redistributive in emphasis; tolerates or encourages sensual gratification; values self-expression against self-restraint; accepts alternative or deviant forms of the family; and emphasizes ethical relativism.'" (*Adelson qtd. in Finn, 1981, p. 60*).

At the root of "deteriorating" school performance (*p. 19*) were principles underlying the women's and gay and trans liberation movement ("sensual gratification" and "deviant forms of the family"). Finn and Adelson's narrative of decline flattened these movements into the singular problem of a "modernist ethos," which 'scorn[ed] the pursuit of success' and was defined instead by the pursuit of pleasure. As Finn amplified the reproductive panic in education, he fashioned himself and the emerging "excellence" consensus as occupying a neutral and politically centrist position by exhorting both conservative and liberal reformers to exercise "restraint."

In this same piece, Finn laid out ten "Precepts of a New Consensus" that undermined the systemic reforms of the Great Society paradigm, from textbooks to desegregation. These precepts offered a blueprint for the Excellence Commission and would largely come to fruition

over the next couple of decades.⁸ The first three proposed the development of content and performance standards for “basic skills” including literacy:

1. First, at every educational level and institution *there must be prescribed a body of knowledge to be absorbed and a set of skills to be mastered* by students at that level.
2. Second, *a student's progress* through school, college, and beyond *must be contingent on his performance*.
3. Third, *an individual must be judged strictly on the basis of his or her own performance*, and neither favored nor blocked by other considerations. (p. 62)

Through this piece, Finn was offering a story-solution framework for educational decline and reform — and positioning himself as an expert — at the very moment “excellence” became a national discourse to be understood through educational research. Not only did Finn tighten deviance knots in his causal account of the failures of Great Society reforms, but his recommendations for standards-based reform targeted the closing of policy opportunities to expand curriculum. While the NCTE's 1974 statement explicitly called for recognizing students' multiple identities and communities in the classroom, Finn's emphasis on “individual performance” shut out considerations of non-standard community knowledge and undercut systemic-focused pathways to create equal opportunity. Finn appealed to the fundamental importance of parents in standards-based reform by enlisting their “watchful eye” in holding educators to account. Deviance knots in social scientists' problem frames became a tool mobilized to build political momentum and to wed standards for basic literacy to family reform.

These ideas linking parental involvement and “The New Basics” emerged from the work of sociologist James Coleman—a former advocate of desegregation. While his famous 1966 report found that non-school factors like family background accounted for educational

⁸ Finn was appointed to Assistant Secretary of Education in 1985 under Bill Bennett, as was his EEN co-director Ravitch in 1991 under then-governor of Tennessee Lamar Alexander, a key architect of *No Child Left Behind* and the *Every Student Succeeds Act*.

achievement, his 1981 study *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared*, Coleman found that schools did have the power to shape outcomes. In particular, Secretary Bell's understanding of "excellence" drew on Coleman's finding that "private schools "expect and demand more of their students—and parents—and they get it" (underlined in Bell's records) to argue that "public schools could indeed benefit from a greater stress on academic subjects, more discipline, and more homework" (*Bell, 1983*). For Bell, as for Finn and excellence reformers, increasing achievement required increased regulation of teenagers' time and behavior, both at school and at home—a key recommendation of the Excellence Commission in *A Nation at Risk* (p. 29, p. 43). In other words, parental involvement was linked to "The New Basics" because, just as parents could hold kids accountable with homework, the nation could hold parents accountable through the specification of performance standards.

Public intellectuals' discourse about these social changes during the development of *A Nation at Risk* underscored the moral dimensions of illiteracy (*Auletta, 1982*). The term "aliteracy" was used to describe the condition of a growing portion of Americans who demonstrated apathy in contributing to U.S. society. According to Denis Doyle, Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the U.S. was experiencing a shift toward a "class and mass" society in which a "well educated class of readers [was] at the top, and an underpopulation of functional illiterates and 'a-literates'[was] spending time each day watching TV as at their jobs" (1982). This unproductive "underclass" would become a key target of public policy scholarship and reform, including in education, throughout the 1980s. In this same letter to Chester Finn, Doyle linked "aliteracy" to two changes during the Great Society: (1) curricular reform, because textbooks "dumbed down" material, and (2) problematic reproductive patterns. Doyle noted that, "daily newspaper circulation was 61 million in 1981, an

increase of only one million from 1965, and lags far behind population growth.” In his reply, Finn wrote that he “shared [Doyle’s] alarm” and “admired [his] diagnosis” (1982). He regretted that he was unable to attend AEI’s September panels on “aliteracy,” in which scholars from University of Maryland Reading Center’s Dr. Robert Wilson, U.S. Congressman Paul Simon, and former D.C. Superintendent and *Washington Post* communications director Vincent Reed were set to present.

Reports for Excellence Commission Rely on Deviance Knots

On October 9th, 1981, President Reagan welcomed the members of the Excellence Commission to the White House (Bell, 1981). In his remarks, Reagan emphasized his educational values, explaining that “the first and most important of those principles is that...education begins in the home, where it is the right and *responsibility* of every parent. Our educational institutions...exist to assist families in the instruction of their children” (Reagan *qtd. in Gardner, 2005, p. 115*; emphasis in the original). Throughout his address, Reagan emphasized that quality schooling reinforced a purported moral discipline of the home. In describing a fourth and final principle, Reagan said, “I think it’s time we too have a good look at this moral side of contemporary schooling. How, for example, can we expect to restore educational excellence in schools still plagued by drug abuse and crime and chronic absenteeism?” The social ills listed by Reagan constituted the basis of a widely shared framework about why schools were declining: because “education begins in the home,” families were ultimately culpable for the prevalence of drug abuse, crime, and chronic absenteeism, and these activities obstructed “children’s sense of honesty, discipline, and direction” and capacity to pursue “educational excellence” (Reagan *qtd. in Gardner, p. 115*). Reagan’s frame of parental “rights and responsibilities” would shape the Commission’s research and reporting on under-achievement in literacy and beyond.

A deeper look at the research papers commissioned by the Excellence Commission and the intellectual production of key members of EEN reveals how a moral panic about social and sexual reproduction lay underneath advocacy for “basic skills” such as literacy. In his September 1982 report for the Excellence Commission, titled “Twenty Five Years of American Education,” Commission, University of Michigan child psychologist and EEN member Joseph Adelson cited economic research to argue that academic decline at the secondary level was tied to problematic reproductive patterns:

“[W]e have seen a rise in the number and proportion of anti-social adolescents—there was an astonishing increase in all indices of social pathology among the young during the last quarter-century, in assaults, suicides, homicides, drug use, out-of-wedlock pregnancy... There were also larger families, which meant a decrease in the number of intellectually able youngsters (Zajonc, 19). Hence, in the post-war era, the schools confronted a horde of youngsters, a large percentage of whom were academically weak and/or anti-social.” (*p. 10-11*)

Adelson’s explanation for educational decline—one that was consistent with the narratives articulated by Reagan, Bell, and Doyle—positioned the moral decay of family life (e.g., “out-of-wedlock pregnancy,” “larger families”) as a key cause of the “paralysis of authority” experienced across the nation by secondary school principals (*p. 9*). Adelson’s narrative of “lost authority” communicated the urgency of restoring “order” in schools and homes, a recommendation that was echoed in another research report produced for the Excellence Commission a month later by Herbert Zimiles, an early child psychologist and Director of Research at the Bank Street College of Education. Titled “The Changing American Child” (1982), Zimiles’ report took up the question of declining literacy in the context of social changes in the previous few decades. Based on interviews with teachers, Zimiles concluded that American children have come to view reading and writing as an “arbitrary imposition of adult authority, and learn to avoid it.”

According to Zimiles, the emergence of this view, and children's ignorance of the "rules of grammar," could be explained by a broader social trend:

"[I]n the interests of gaining a still greater measure of freedom and equality in our society, there is a spirit of emancipating and disclosing, of removing curtains and barriers... These trends are expressed in the overthrow of tradition, formality, and religion... Thus, all of society is joined in what is sometimes a freeing of the selves and sometimes 'a killing of the father.' In all of this, there is an investment in neutralizing power, in erasing distinctions between boss and worker, and also, between adult and child." (p. 29)

As this report was written for the Excellence Commission, Zimiles' attribution of declining literacy to a "killing of the father" can begin to address the gendered dimensions of the paradox in Commission's dual language of parental "rights" and "responsibilities." Under this view, the more involved a "father" is in a child's education, the more likely the child, family, and nation would be to succeed.

Zimiles further attributed family breakdown and educational under-achievement in part to a feminist ideology that became more accepted during the Great Society: "During this era of rejection of tradition and ritual, when flexibility is especially valued, and new modes of family functioning and organization are being called forth by divorce and/or mother working, there is less regularity and predictability to family life. Parents are less available to answer questions, provide clarification and reassurance, and present a sense of continuity." Zimiles feared that televisions were taking over parental roles in sharing information about the world, and he pitted television against reading as a medium that encourages children to "abandon their watchfulness." According to Zimiles, Adelson, and other scholar-architects of content and performance standards, the treatment of school as a site of family values transmission became especially important given changes to gendered norms in the family. By racializing the panic around educational decline, these actors laid out the ingredients for constructing the category of the

“single Black mother on welfare.” In his report, Zimiles linked family instability, sex, violence, crime, and television to suggest that elementary school children’s exposure to these behaviors was greater in “urban settings” (p. 23). This was a clear example of an appeal to coded constructions of Black communities in order to racialize the panic and justify the need for moral reform toward literacy skills. As for high school students, Adelson lamented their “thuggishness,” which he linked to an increase in “out-of-wedlock” pregnancies and “larger families,” as observed by economists (p. 10-11). In helping the federal government set an agenda for education reform, scholars working for the Excellence Commission and the Educational Excellence Network translated research on family demography into the realm of education research and policymaking.⁹ The gendered racist pathologies around Black mothers and their children formed the intellectual basis of problem and solution frames.

Deviance Knots Facilitate Spread of “Excellence” Narrative of Educational Decline

As “excellence” reformers used deviance knots rooted in social scientific pathologies to advocate for national education reform as a cause of and solution to reproductive panic, these knots became accepted and regurgitated by leading national activists for women and children. On Father’s Day in 1982, Colorado Democrat Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder attributed economic problems to “fathers who abandoned the responsibility of their families,” and linked this economic frame to education policy. Schroeder, formerly a teacher in Denver Public Schools and employee of Planned Parenthood, was a known feminist who played a key role in the passage of the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act and a member of the Select Committee on

⁹ In their work, Finn and Ravitch recommended economist Thomas Sowell’s book *Markets and Minorities* (1981) as useful reading for the field’s understanding of racial and ethnic equality. Examining the relationship between fertility rates and family economic outcomes, Sowell made the point that more educated racial and ethnic “minorities” had fewer children than equally educated white people. According to Sowell, this was a fertility pattern that had “grim economic implications” because the “disadvantaged portions of the ethnic group produce more of the next generation in proportion to their numbers in the population” (p. 17). Sowell’s analysis rendered teenage mothers of poor Black and Brown families a key obstacle to social equality.

Children, Youth, and Families. In her statement on welfare titled “Father’s Day—and Abandoned Children,” Schroeder shared a *Washington Post* article titled, “The Kids They Leave Behind” by Julius Duscha (1982). Schroeder read from the article that whereas in 1979,

“...nearly 10 percent of all children born to white women were born out of wedlock [f]or Black women the figure was an astonishing 55 percent.” Duscha wrote that children in one-parent households were more likely to become involved in crime, and that “all studies of education [he] had ever seen show conclusively that a stable and normal home environment—which generally means the presence of both father and mother—is the most important prerequisite to good performance in the classroom.” (qtd. in *Congressional Record—Extension of Remarks*, 1982)

Schroeder’s application of Duscha’s analysis, which highlighted the “astonishing” rates of children born to single Black mothers, reflected how the racialization of moral panic led Democrats to embrace the linkage between heteronormative nuclear family values and educational achievement. The tangling of deviance knots in popular media, Congressional debates, and research in education was used both by policy actors who sought to indict single Black mothers and by those who sought to come to their defense and promote fatherhood.

Excellence Commission hearings revealed how deviance knots shifted the terms of the debate on equality in education to assimilative approaches to learning, as compared to the transformative possibilities opened up by curricular reforms and legal protections of the 1970s. During a regional hearing in Dallas, Texas in October 1982, Intercultural Development Research Association scholar Gloria Zamora argued for increased federal investment in racially minoritized communities. Referencing the Commission’s goal to understand how social changes in the preceding decades influenced educational achievement, Zamora said, “The increase of women in the workforce, the increase in the number of female heads of households, drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, the changing immigration policies, recent immigrants, and the influx of undocumented children have no doubt impacted upon the American educational conditions of

minority America to the larger society” (1982). While Zamora was still arguing for more resources and attention for Black and brown students, her concession to this narrative helped to sever links in Great Society reform movements between redistributive policy and curricular reform. In other words, the focus among racial and gender equality activists was no longer a dual focus on redistribution and inclusive literacy practices.¹⁰ The latter pathway was obstructed by boundaries repeatedly drawn throughout the 1980s by reformers and Education Department officials around “academic” versus “non-academic” curriculum¹¹ (Finn, 1981; Senese, 1982, 1983; Ravitch, 1983¹²; Bunzel et al., 1985).

A Nation at Risk Uses Deviance Knots to Codify and Legitimize “Excellence” Narrative

Both the clinical language of “functional illiterates” and the moral undertones of “aliteracy” were central to the Excellence Commission’s declaration of crisis. From the opening of *A Nation at Risk*, the Commission explained its concern about academic “mediocrity” in the moral terms of social reproduction as well as the economic terms of national productivity. For example, the Commission quoted by Paul Copperman, president of the Institute of Reading Development: “Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of our generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those

¹⁰ Reform efforts for expansive literacy were already losing steam by the summer of 1981 (see Fiske, 1981).

¹¹ This boundary-setting was a broader reform effort across education, including higher education (McCambly & Mulroy, 2023). Common expressions of this boundary that framed Black and feminist approaches to humanities as “non-academic” included “warm mush,” “gobbledygook,” “cafeteria style,” and “smorgasbord.”

¹² According to Ravitch’s leading account of the failures of Great Society reform, “[T]he public schools did not adjust easily or quickly to the new programs of the 1970s [...] Schoolteachers were directly affected by...the introduction of bilingual education; by the mainstreaming of mildly retarded children into their classroom; by busing of school children or by reassignment of teachers for racial balance; by the removal of a textbook because it was offensive to some particular group; by the splitting of history into courses on ethnic groups or women; or by the ethnic revival, which some professional educators joined by declaring that all students have the ‘right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.’” (p. 311)

of their parents” (p. 11). This made education reform a matter of national progress, measurable by family outcomes.

In the body of *A Nation at Risk*, the Commission specifically targeted curricular reform and parental behavior as mechanisms of national education decline as observable in illiteracy rates, and therefore necessary sites of reform. First, the Commission laid blame on the pedagogical reforms of the previous decades: “Curricular smorgasbord, combined with extensive student choice, explains a great deal about where we find ourselves today” (p. 26). This emphasis on expanding curriculum echoed the explanation given by Doyle and by many in Finn’s Educational Excellence Network. Second, in its final pages, the Commission directly addressed and subtly reproached American parents:

“Your right to a proper education for your children carries a double responsibility. As surely you are your child’s first and most influential teacher, your child’s ideas about education and its significance begin with you. You must be a *living* example of what you expect your children to honor and to emulate. Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your child’s education. You should encourage more diligent study and discourage satisfaction with mediocrity and the attitude that says ‘let it slide’; monitor your child’s study; encourage good study habits...and be an active participant in the work of the schools. Above all, exhibit a commitment to continued learning in your own life. Finally, help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment.” (p. 43)

Echoing Reagan in his private speech to the Excellence Commission on its first day of work, the Excellence Commission’s dual language of “rights” and “responsibilities.” This dual language presented a paradox in education reform: just as experts framed schooling as a vehicle for repairing an intergenerational cycle of under-achievement, they framed parents as the primary driver and arbiter of children’s learning. In short, school ought to be *for* and *by* the parents of nuclear families. This made parental engagement, or adherence to family values in education, a clear solution to educational decline alongside curricular narrowing toward “The New Basics,”

of which literacy formed a chief part. Deviance knots linked the economic and reproductive aims of education reform toward “excellence,” evident in the Commission’s reasoning that “The New Basics” comprised “the foundation of success for the after-school years.”

1983-1989: “Excellence” Movement Drives Exclusionary Literacy Policy

On the heels of *A Nation at Risk*, Finn, Ravitch, the EEN, and the Department of Education gained increased backing and federal funding from the National Endowment for Humanities to continue crafting and enacting their standards-driven agenda for “excellence.” In bringing this agenda to different states and policy institutions, this network cited Ravitch’s book *The Troubled Crusade* (1983) as a thorough historical account of the purported causes of decline. Ravitch’s deviance knots linked the short-term causes of under-achievement among the “disadvantaged” to longer-term causes: “The desire for increased opportunity and the decline of agricultural employment propelled large numbers of poor blacks and Hispanics to the urban centers in the 1950s and 1960s, and the cities developed vast slum areas, where the poor concentrated, dependent on impersonal public institutions, bereft of the sense of family and community that had sustained their counterparts in rural areas.” Ravitch’s story of Black and Brown communities’ “dependence on impersonal public institutions” moved blame beyond Great Society reform and located it within the “desire for increased opportunity and the decline of agricultural employment.” Not unlike economists Ross and Sawhill in *Time of Transition*, Ravitch identified the loss of a “sense of family and community” as a mechanism of under-achievement. The implication was not just that poor Black and Brown communities developed problematic families; it was that these communities did not have a “sense of family” at all. Just as the label of “non-academic” effectively excised inclusive literacy from the reform

agenda, this language of “bereft” and “deprivation” (*Hirsch, 1987*) removed extended family forms from the possibility of recognition and inclusion.

Two years after his report to the Excellence Commission, Adelson amplified his narrative about “lowered intellectual capacity” alongside a “staggering increase” in “illegitimate births” in an essay written for the growing EEN and later published in a book filled with contributions by EEN members titled *Challenge to American Schools: The Case for Standards and Values* (1985). Adelson wrote that, “It is perhaps worth mentioning here that the lowering of family size and birth rate, though little noted by writers on education up until now, will likely be the single most important benign influence on American schooling in the next decade.” While Coleman and the Excellence Commission insinuated that education reform via standards could serve as a tool to fortify the family, Adelson also drew a causal arrow between birth control and educational improvement. Women’s reproductive choices thus became a legitimate target of scrutiny within education policy.

For example, in the summer after *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the United States Commission on Civil Rights published *A Growing Crisis: Disadvantaged Women and their Children*. Chaired by EEN affiliate Clarence Pendleton, who had switched from a Democrat to a Republican during Reagan’s election in 1980, the Civil Rights Commission cited and echoed the findings of Ross and Sawhill about the drastic rise in “the number of blacks in poor female-headed families” in the 1960s and 1970s (*p. 2*). Using data from the 1982 Current Population Survey and focusing on “white, black, and Hispanic female-headed households and their children,” the Commission’s first chapter examined the relationship between marriage and motherhood. It summarized that, “The phenomenal growth of female house-holder families, stemming in part from increasing marital disruption and out-of-wedlock births, has forced many

women to be both chief parent and child provider. The continuing trend in teenage childbearing out of wedlock is cause for concern. Teenage mothers often must interrupt or discontinue their education thereby making the acquisition of marketable employment skills more difficult. If unable to find adequate and affordable child care, the teenage mother and those who experience marital disruption may be forced to rely upon public assistance for basic needs” (p. 14). While the Commission later concluded that the “economic disadvantage [faced by single mothers] cannot be redressed through education alone,” it made “self-sufficiency” the end goal and called attention to the need to support the education of Black and Hispanic teenage women to break intergenerational cycles of poverty (p. 46). According to the Commission, the major goal in federal education efforts was to find a way to ensure that Black and Hispanic students did not “fall behind,” or worse, drop out (p. 46). *A Growing Crisis* positioned educational reform toward women’s employment as a key mechanism for racial equality. Like the Congressional Task Force on Prevention Strategies later in 1983 and the National Conference of State Legislatures Teenage Pregnancy Project in 1985, the Commission sought to resolve a racialized “crisis” in teenage pregnancy by improving the performance of young women in school so that they would ultimately be more employable. While the Commission detailed the importance of instructional materials that were not sexist, their focus was exclusively on how these materials would impact gender-neutral equality of academic and labor outcomes (p. 36-37). The Civil Rights Commission’s approach to educational equality in *A Growing Crisis* reflected a shift in federal civil rights strategy from the 1970s: away from prioritizing combating the systemic disadvantages facing students of color, especially women of color (e.g. supporting school based health centers), toward prioritizing outcomes such as rates of marriage and employment.

With many civil rights activists having adopted the discourse of gendered racial panic, some education reformers began to litigate whether the government had a responsibility to support “dependent” and “disadvantaged” families. Critically, the widespread narrative of family moral decay enabled some to blame Black mothers’ behavior for the “under-achievement” and “criminality” of Black men, thereby constituting black women as a threat to nationhood (*Murray, 1984*). However, in debates that played out in the *New York Times* and other popular media as well as in policy research books (*Moynihan, 1986*), a significant number of leading social scientists and journalists argued that the federal government had a moral imperative to intervene (*Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Jencks, 1985*). By 1986, the National Governors Association (NGA), in a precursor to the National Education Goals, laid out a widespread report titled *Time for Results: The Governors’ 1991 Report on Education* (designed to illustrate the path states ought to take over the next five years). The NGA provided recommendations for improving education across the country, with the third and fourth goals listed as “promoting greater parent involvement and choice in their youngsters’ education” and “helping at-risk children and youth meet higher education standards.” The NGA endorsed the growth of the NAEP to test and report student outcomes, which “significantly contribut[ed] to the movement to collect and disseminate state-level comparative student achievement data in the 1990s” (*Vinovskis, 1999, p. 19*).

In addition to state officials, much of this reform energy came from the Respectable Left, including members of Black communities and researchers advocating for the well-being of mothers (*McLanahan, 1985; Raspberry, 1985*). In *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1987), Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson argued that “measures to aid poor families” were necessary but insufficient, and that,

[these reform efforts] need to be included in a more comprehensive reform program designed to create a tight labor market that enhances the employment opportunities of

both poor men and women. Such an undertaking will, we believe, do far more in the long run to enhance the stability and reduce the welfare dependency of low-income black families than will cutting the vital provisions of the welfare state.... To identify black male joblessness and poverty as a major source of black family disintegration is not to suggest that policymakers should ignore the problems of joblessness and poverty among current female heads of families. Rather we underline the point that the tragic decline in the black male 'marriageable pool' in any serious policy deliberations on the plight of poor American families." (p. 106)

Wilson argued that single Black women who were on welfare needed more than financial support in the long term: they also needed husbands. He called on public policymakers broadly to develop strategies so that Black men could be more employable and more suitable for marriage.

In 1988, Maris Vinovskis, education historian and future contributor to the accountability agenda laid out in *National Education Goals* (1989) and *Goals 2000* (1994), wrote *An 'Epidemic' of Adolescent Pregnancy?* Vinovskis examined the political landscape surrounding the increase in teenage pregnancy over the 1970s and 1980s. Key to Vinovskis' argument was the Carter Administration's (1976-1980) failure to consider policies about fatherhood:

"Most of the debate about adolescent pregnancy centered on the female with very little attention to the male role—particularly in regard to the possible financial responsibility for his child? Should greater efforts have been made to force young fathers to support the adolescent mother—thus making it easier for her to raise the child as well as partially reducing the welfare costs to the rest of society?... Because the likelihood of an out-of-wedlock birth is much higher among blacks than whites, even after controlling their socioeconomic characteristics, should more attention have been paid to the factors within black culture that contribute to higher rates of out-of-wedlock births among adolescents?" (p. 30-31)

Vinovskis' questions echoed ideas in Wilson's advocacy of a male-focused "national labor market strategy" for Black family uplift and reinvigorated the "culture of poverty" thesis while doing so. Vinovskis' use of deviance knots was clear in the association of "out-of-wedlock" and adolescent birth rates and welfare costs with Blackness. More broadly, his scholarship reflected an increasingly dominant understanding of education policy, and standards-based accountability

in particular, as a strategy for Black nuclear family uplift. When George H.W. Bush won the presidency and claimed to be the nation's "Education President" in 1988, Vinovskis was one of the people hired to develop policy in the Department of Education. Bush made clear his administration's emphasis on family values in education in his announcement of the *National Education Goals* (1989): "And come the next century - just 10 years away - what will we be? Will we be children of the Enlightenment or its orphans?" Not only did Bush's rhetorical question undercut forms of kinship that existed outside bio-genetic kinship, but it also reflected an increasingly institutionalized link between Western knowledge systems and achievement.

In the research and policy recommendations of influential education scholars, the moral imperative to use education policy to intervene and support nuclear family uplift took the form of reading standards, cultural literacy, and character education. This was a set of curricular reforms that "excellence" advocates for a "core" curriculum, including Secretary Bennett, saw as interlinked and tied to family values (Bennett, 1985-1987; Finn & Ravitch, 1987). Critically, those in favor of a "core" curriculum presumed that the families of "disadvantaged" children had little or no cultural knowledge to contribute to the national core curriculum and used literacy research to justify this excision. For example, in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987), E.D. Hirsch cited the work of Dr. Jeanne Chall to claim that while "the technical reading skills of disadvantaged children at age six are still on par with those of children from literate families" by age seven or eight, "their reading skills begin to diverge according to socioeconomic status, chiefly because low-income pupils lack elementary cultural knowledge" (p. III). Notably, Hirsch's book offers the Black Panther newspaper as an example of discourse that was "radical in sentiment" yet "conservative in language and assumed knowledge" (p. 22). This labeling of the Black Panther newspaper as "conservative" de-fanged the Black radical

literary and political tradition of its aims at social disruption and transformation. Moreover, Hirsch's proposed national humanities curriculum included canonical Black men's voices — Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Booker T. Washington — but not Black or Brown women's voices or queer community voices. These examples illustrated the masculinist terms by which the development of a national literacy policy accommodated calls for racial uplift.

When it came to the education of young Black women, Secretary Bill Bennett's proposed humanities curriculum (1987) identified forms of literacy deemed important to effective education. Bennett offers the "curricular excellence profile" of Xavier Prep school as a model of how and why young Black women should learn in schools:

Many of Xavier Prep's 495 students — all black girls — come from disadvantaged homes. More than a third of them live with only one parent and almost that many are on public assistance. But the little school on the river side of Magazine Street in New Orleans knows what to do... The school's president, Sister Eileen Sullivan, has a simple message for her students: "You need an education." They get one at Xavier. It's done with a carefully planned and unashamedly traditional core curriculum. (p. 43)

As in Hirsch's proposed curriculum, the "unashamedly traditional core" curriculum at Xavier was dominated by white men writers and did not include Black or Brown women's or queer community voices. Bennett framed the importance of education to young Black women through the use of deviance knots: by gaining cultural literacy and basic skills, Black girls at Xavier Prep could transcend their family backgrounds as members of single-parent families who were on welfare. This erased the possibility that education could be a means to connect more deeply with one's self and community history.

Discussion

Education scholarship suggests that official boundary-setting of race and gender identity categories in education policy can drive exclusion both in on-the-ground learning experiences in classrooms and through broader educational programs and policies such as “family literacy.” Yet, the political processes and causal mechanisms driving this boundary-setting has not been clearly understood. Decoding this boundary-setting is an important task for education researchers and policymakers given the prevalence of race- and gender-evasive language in accountability policies alongside the erasure of racialized and (trans)gendered literacy practices. While scholars have begun to illustrate how race-neutral education reform can reproduce the ideology and unequal outcomes of racial hierarchy (Leonardo, 2007; McCambly et al., 2024), less understood are whether and how heteronormativity and (cis)patriarchy operate in these covert processes.

In this study, I take up this puzzle by developing a framework that treats U.S. literacy education governance as a gendered racial project of nation-building — in particular, one in which a moral policy discourse about (il)literacy can enable officials to link gender and racial identity categories to demarcate boundaries of belonging within categories of students, families, and schools between achievement and respectability on one hand, and deficit and deviance on the other. When applied to the case of standards-based literacy, this framework of curricular politics illuminates how causal narratives and reform solutions for education reform could be built on racial and gender constructs, how they gained political legitimacy, and how stories and solutions became codified into policy in facially race- and gender-neutral ways.

In my findings, I show how, amidst myriad federal reform possibilities, the emergence of reading standards linking basic literacy to national citizenship resulted from “excellence” reformers’ appeal to a playbook of divide and rule. During and after the Excellence Commission (1981-1983), reform leaders deployed warp and weft to moral panics across education (e.g.,

expansive curriculum, racial desegregation), family life (e.g., teenage pregnancy), and national economic decline (Finn, 1981). To a large extent, these reformers obtained power in shaping education governance by observing, adapting, and legitimizing popular and scholarly uses of “single-parent” and “female-headed” households and “juvenile delinquents” as populations of blame in stories of underperformance (*Adelson, 1982; Zimiles, 1982*). These pathologies placed under-resourced Black and Brown mothers and fathers, their daughters and sons, and “wasteful” Great Society education legislation on a moral trial in educational policy and research. In turn, a reservoir of dog whistles enabled the spread of a thinly veiled gendered racial narrative of blame and shame and the encoding of this narrative into key texts. Namely, in its “Address to Parents” in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the Excellence Commission’s language of “rights and responsibilities” legitimized a boundary constructed in the popular and scholarly imagination that there were parents who “cared” and those who did not care enough (e.g., *McGraw, 1978; Ross & Sawhill, 1975*). Given the rising activism against Great Society education reforms among white parents’ groups in the previous decade, the Commission’s affirmation of parental participation in schooling carried racialized ideas about which families needed to “straighten out,” how, and why. Based on this finding, I argue that under accountability (a) “basic skills” signals modes of learning rooted in gendered racial exclusion and (b) “parents’ rights” (and later “parental choice”) has emerged as a gendered racial discourse in education policy supporting the reproduction of economically self-sufficient, monoracial, cis(hetero)normative households.

This study thus joins and expands a new line of education scholarship illustrating the need to understand the formative political origins of educational standards in order to decode ostensibly race-neutral processes and identify structural causes of racial inequality. Studies have shown that the reliance on metrics to evaluate students and schools without accounting for the

racialized contexts in which those metrics were constructed can sustain or exacerbate racial inequalities. Yet, this study of federal literacy policy uncovers and analyzes the key roles that gender, sexuality, and class constructs and biases can play in such processes. To develop data tools and define “problems” and “crises” in education, the excellence movement relied on limited knowledge of “deviant” families — a category formed through gender, sexuality, and class constructs in addition to racial ones. As racially and socially progressive actors of the time highlighted (*Howe, 1978*), “excellence” reformers used biased test scores to define the problem of “functional illiteracy,” which made students and families marked as “deviant” foremost targets of reform (e.g., *Ravitch, 1983*). That means the instruments purported to enhance literacy learning stigmatized the very students and families whose literacy knowledge was disregarded in the making of these instruments. As such, causal narratives that blamed the behaviors of under-resourced Black and Brown families for national decline justified the continued restriction of their knowledge in teaching, learning, and policy (e.g., *Wilson, 1987; Hirsch, 1987*). Thus, without looking at how gender, sexuality, and class intersect with racialized constructs in educational policy, we are left without a clear understanding of how policy boundaries erected around curriculum, citizenship, and family structure can contribute to racial exclusion and inequity in on-the-ground learning experiences and outcomes.

Theorizing the Dirty Work of Deviance Knots

In order to explain *how* gendered racial narratives led to these normative boundaries (i.e., gained legitimacy and drove the enactment of ostensibly race- and gender-neutral policies), I developed and traced the political efficacy of deviance knots: a rhetorical device that encompassed a primary and secondary linkage: first, between “deviant” families (including children) and Great Society federal policy, and second, within these deviant categories, between

Blackness (or Brownness) and “unproductive” categories of gender, sexuality, and/or class. Through these two sets of linkages, deviance knots *(a) threaded national moral panics about educational achievement, heteronormative family life, and economic prosperity and (b) coded social identity categories to package a gendered racial narrative*. Table 1 illustrates and explains both examples and non-examples of deviance knots in policy discourse. Since deviance knots became indispensable tools for embedding literacy standards rooted in “basic skills” and family economic and moral “uplift” as twin reform solutions for educational “equality,” I argue that deviance knots sewed gendered racial exclusion into the fabric of educational accountability. As a result of the popular, bipartisan adoption of a coded narrative attributing educational decline to poor Black and Brown families and “wasteful” Great Society policy, excellence reformers and their allies could re-define “equality” as racial uplift and respectability, rather than systemic protections for inclusive and expansive learning. These paternalistic logics of equality comprised dominant approaches to official literacy reform, which de-fanged Black literary and political heritage of its liberatory potential (e.g., Hirsch, 1987). This realignment severed historical and potential ties between movements for racial and gender liberation. Based on this finding, I argue that deviance knots help to explain what scholars have identified as epistemic exclusion, or the historical and ongoing marginalization and erasure of Black and Brown women, queer, and trans communities’ literacy practices and intellectual labor as readers and writers of the social order.

My findings illustrate how deviance knots drove epistemic exclusion via standardized literacy and humanities curriculum and “family literacy” programs in two key ways. First, deviance knots divided and ruled historically marginalized and under-resourced racialized and gendered communities, restricting their collective power by making any marginalized community’s acceptance into normative confines of the nation conditional upon its

differentiation from categories marked as deviant or deficient. In other words, deviance knots specified pathological family structures, child and family behaviors, and pedagogical modes that marginalized groups needed to *either publicly defend or distance themselves from*. This discursive tool shifted the terms of reform debate either by putting pressure on minoritized groups to vindicate (and/or “reform”) their own members or by fragmenting ties within and between minoritized groups. Second, deviance knots empowered already-dominant groups by authorizing their punishment and/or paternalism of children and families marked deviant or deficient. In my findings, I show how deviance knots that linked educational underperformance to immoral behavior—rather than other possible causes, including systemic biases in standards-based assessments or the distribution of educational resources—provided elite scholars and officials with feigned legitimacy to author and police normative boundaries in causal stories of decline and reform solutions. I posit that, without deviance knots that threaded national moral panics across education, family, and economics, new interracial solidarities may not have emerged. And without the widespread adoption of a gendered racial narrative sewn by deviance knots, policy to improve literacy and achievement could have taken other forms (e.g, textbook guidelines, support of AAVE), which *could have unsettled* both traditional family structure and the race-class-gender order. The crackdown against protections for expansive literacies is proof of their transformative potential, as new modes of reading the word often open up new ways of reading and being in the world.

As students and families continue to learn amidst standards-based literacy policy, scholars carry on a tradition of Black educational heritage in ways that challenge gendered racial exclusion. Critical frameworks such as Pritchard’s “restorative literacies” (2016), Baker-Bell’s “linguistic justice” (2020), Reid’s Black LGBTQ+ inclusive K-12 curriculum (2023),

Brockenbrough's "critical queering of care" for youth of color (2024) have provided alternative approaches to literacy and literacy education. Given these calls for transformation, it is crucial for scholars and policymakers to understand how to create and sustain the conditions for transformative learning — or, to interrogate upstream facilitators and barriers. My examination of deviance knots as key mechanisms of gendered racial exclusion highlights how education policy is a living, mutable product of policy actors' ethical and intellectual work with social identity categories. When DeSantis positions queer theory as outside of African American history, his use of a deviance knot—in the words of Morrison—"does more than represent violence; it is violence." This discourse, which attacks expansive curriculum and erases those who live and learn outside normative lines, lays groundwork for blaming underachievement on family behavior and redistributive systems and punishing marginalized communities.

Figures

Figure 1: Timeline of key developments in the making of federal literacy policy under standards-based accountability. Note: This is not meant to be an exhaustive set of events and texts, and there are many other developments covered.

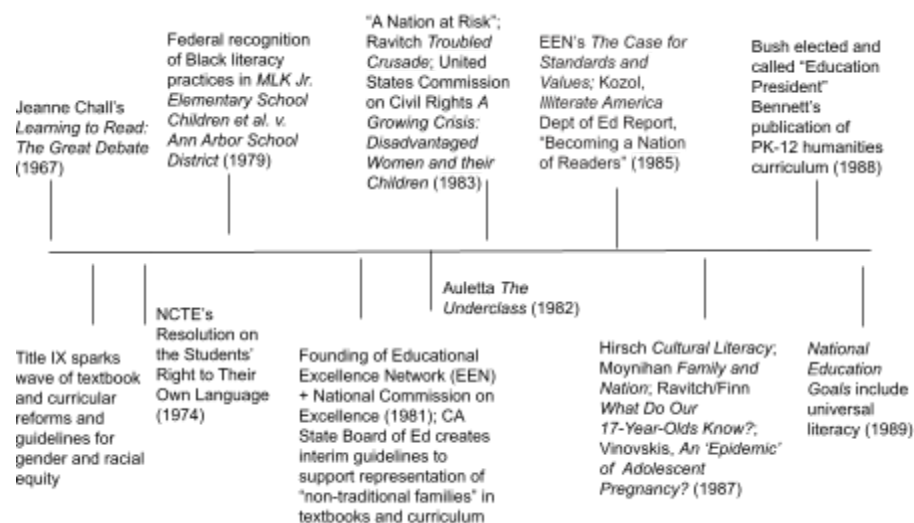
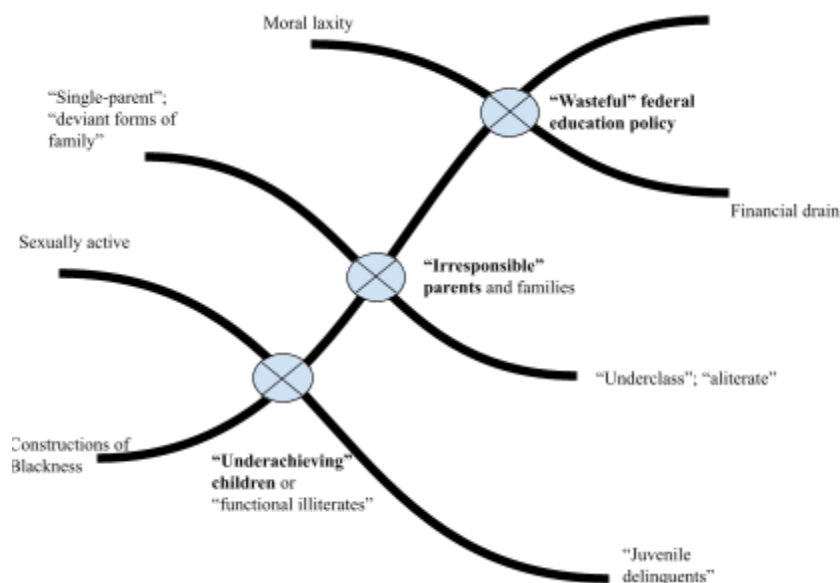


Figure 2: Model of how deviance knots can drive a gendered racial project by (1) interweaving and moral panics about family structure, educational performance, and economics; and can (2) tacitly carry a gendered racial narrative of Black and Brown families' purported "irresponsibility."



Tables

Table 1: Exemplars of deviance knots in the archival data that spread a gendered racial narrative, compared with examples of data that capture alternative policy discourse linking race and gender.

“Deviance knot” in policy narratives		Alternative intersectional policy discourse	
Example data	Explanation	Example data	Explanation
Joseph Adelson qtd. in Finn, “Toward a New Consensus,” <i>Change</i> (Sept. 1981): “[There is a] conflict within the schools between the traditional values that most American parents wish imparted to their children—values such as ‘merit, accomplishment, competition, and success; self-restraint, self-discipline, and the postponement of gratification; the stability of the family; and a belief in certain moral universals’—and a modernist ethos that ‘scorns the pursuit of success; is egalitarian and redistributive in emphasis; tolerates or encourages sensual gratification; values self-expression against self-restraint; accepts alternative or deviant forms of the family; and emphasizes ethical relativism.’”	At the root of “deteriorating” school performance (p. 19) were principles underlying social liberation movements (“sensual gratification” and “deviant forms of the family”). This narrative of decline flattened movements for racial, gender, and sexual equality into the singular problem of a “modernist ethos,” which ‘scorn[ed] the pursuit of success’ and was defined instead by the pursuit of pleasure.	Harold Howe, Keynote Address, NIE National Conference on Testing and Basic Skills (1978). “I have to raise the difficult question of whether the national mood for improving basic skills performance has hidden within it overtones of racism... [W]e do black children a disservice not to hold them to the same expectations as we do white children. At the same time, we know that inequalities in the lives of children outside the school are reflected in school performance, and the black, Hispanic, and Native American children are peculiarly subject to handicaps from both poverty and discrimination”	This statement does <i>not</i> link Blackness to reproductive concerns around socialization or sexuality; rather, this statement holds that education reform outside of performance standards is necessary to support the learning of Black and Brown students.
Herbert Zimiles, “The Changing American Child,” a report to the Excellence Commission (Oct. 1982): “Children, especially in urban settings, wrestle with imponderables today more than in earlier times. They are concerned with a multitude of things that they don’t understand, whether it is the reasons for discord between their parents and the imminent or actual threat of family breakup, or matters dealing with sex, social problems, political issues and the threat of nuclear war, or violence and crime that is impossible to control.”	This linked family instability, sex, violence, and crime to suggest that elementary school children’s exposure to these behaviors was greater in “urban settings” (p. 23). This was an appeal to coded constructions of Black communities in order to racialize a reproductive panic and justify the need for moral reform toward literacy skills.	<i>The Chicago Tribune</i> article titled “Teen Pregnancy: Nation Faces Devastating Problem” (May 1981) stated that the number of sexually active teenagers increased by two-thirds in the previous decade. The article cited a recent Stanford Research Institute study that reasoned that “just those babies born to American teenagers in 1978 would cost taxpayers \$8 billion a year in medical and welfare costs.”	The <i>Chicago Tribune</i>’s article on the “problem” of teen pregnancy is an example of how moral panic could exist in popular media without being racialized, nor necessarily brought into the realm of education policy.

Patricia Schroeder (Dem) in Congress (1982): “[In 1979 whereas] nearly 10 percent of all children born to white women were born out of wedlock [f]or Black women the figure was an astonishing 55 percent.” Duscha wrote that children in one-parent households were more likely to become involved in crime, and that “all studies of education [he] had ever seen show conclusively that a stable and normal home environment—which generally means the presence of both father and mother—is the most important prerequisite to good performance in the classroom.”	Colorado Democratic legislator Rep. Schroeder’s application of journalist Duscha’s analysis, which highlighted the “astonishing” rates of children born to single Black mothers, reflected how racialization of moral panics led Democrats to embrace the linkage between heteronormative nuclear family values and educational achievement.	Geneva Smitherman’s proposed national literacy policy (1987): 1. “Reinforce and reaffirm the legitimacy of non-mainstream languages and dialects and promote mother tongue instruction as a co-equal language of instruction... 2. Promote the acquisition of one or more foreign languages, preferably a language spoken by persons in the Third World, such as Spanish, because of its widespread use in this hemisphere”	Use of “mother tongue” highlights the gendered components of the racial politics of literacy policy development and gestures toward Black Feminist struggles to broaden literacy policy.
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Table 2: List of archival data sources

Archival Site and Paper Collections	
Department of Education Records, 1979-2005. <i>National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD</i>	916 documents
Papers of the Department of Education under the Reagan Administration, 1979-1989. <i>Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA</i>	151 documents
Chester E. Finn, Jr. Papers, 1966-2000. <i>Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Palo Alto, CA</i>	293 documents
Diane Ravitch Papers, 1956-2007. <i>Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Palo Alto, CA</i>	419 documents
Papers of Pauli Murray, 1827-1985, <i>Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA</i>	136 documents
Papers of Florynce Kennedy, 1915-2004, <i>Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA</i>	130 documents
Reports, monographs, and memoirs by education researchers and reformers, 1966-2015 accessed online (e.g., through <i>Education Resources Information Center</i>) and through the Northwestern University Library	101 documents
Total	2,146 documents

Table 3: Representation of literacy policy development through political contestation and negotiation over competing logics of reform, revealing the shifting meanings of “equality.”

Year	National policy coalitions	Literacy policy reforms	Meaning of “equality”
1965-1981 <i>Great Society policy reforms</i>	Great Society education: cultural assimilation advocates, racial equality advocates, gender equality advocates Religious Right: moral advocates (concerned with family moral panic) Corporate/business advocates (concerned with economic & federal government policy panic)	• Textbook reform for racial and gender inclusivity & equity • Federal recognition of “Black Idiom” & AAVE • Desegregation • Federal funding/financial redistribution	• Equality is understood as inclusion and redistribution • Rejection of “basic skills” as racist, classist, and sexist
1981-1983 <i>“Excellence” movement seeks and gains legitimacy</i>	“Excellence” movement unified cultural assimilation advocates, Religious Right, Big Business, and <i>some</i> racial and gender equality advocates	• Proposed linkage of “basic skills” to family values, parental “rights,” and “cultural literacy”	• Official challenge to Great Society notion of equality
1983-1989 <i>“Excellence” movement drives accountability policy</i>	1983-1987: “Excellence” movement spreads 1987-1989: “Excellence” ideas institutionalized in US Dept of Education (Reagan administration) & Congress	• Officialized linkage of “basic skills” to family values, parental rights, and “cultural literacy” • Creation & dissemination of literacy policy texts based on this linkage	• Equality is understood as respectability • Acceptance & institutionalization of “basic skills” as tool for “equality” respectability

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Note: The archival references are indicated in-text in italics. The full archival references list is currently in preparation and will be ready by the conference.

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