AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF CULTIC ELEMENTS IN EDUCATION AS I'VE KNOWN IT:
FOR CRITICAL DEMOCRATIC PEDAGOGIES

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ABSTRACT

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF CULTIC ELEMENTS IN EDUCATION AS I'VE KNOWN IT:
FOR CRITICAL DEMOCRATIC PEDAGOGIES

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While there is existing research surrounding the democratic potentials of the United States educational system and the vegan movement, two spaces of personal belonging for the author, there is a limited body of work discussing how these spaces may operate with specific characteristics that have been attributed to cult-like groups. Using Dr. Steven Hassan's BITE (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional Control) Model of Cultic Influence, as well as the lens of critical pedagogy, this autoethnography explores possible authoritarian tendencies within the larger educational system and the vegan movement respectively.

The purpose of this study is to delve into and reflect on the following questions:

1. What are common elements of and within schooling that can be identified as authoritarian and thus resembling documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups?

2. What are common elements of and within the vegan movement that can be identified as resembling documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups?

3.   How can I learn through this study to create greater space for critical "deprogramming" of normalized educational procedures within these areas of my work and life?

This study creates space for critical deprogramming by exposing how systems such as schooling and the vegan movement may enforce conformity and suppress independent thought in order to achieve their goals. Through Hassan's BITE model, I reveal the subtle mechanisms by which these systems at times regulate behavior, information, thought, and emotions to maintain control. The findings of the study further confirm that the road towards change will be tough, because so many are conditioned to prescribe to the current system. However, it is not an impossible feat to combat; it requires a heavy upheaval towards the road to change. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https:// etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: critical pedagogy, autoethnography, BITE Model, democratic education, cultic groups, indoctrination

Dedication

This body of work is dedicated to my late—but never forgotten brother, Brandon Randall.

You *were* right.

To my babygirl, Coco Chanel—fifteen years was not enough.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

We don't need no education.
We don't need no thought control.
Pink Floyd, "Another Brick in the Wall, Pt 2"

Problem Statement/Background

In today's society, movements advocating for racial and minority justice (like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and animal justice (such as veganism) are seemingly increasingly labeled negatively by those opposed to them as "cults" that promote anti-democratic forms of indoctrination (Aguilera-Carnerero & Carretero-González, 2021; Gregson et al., 2022; Rufo, 2023). In contemplating these claims, an important question was raised for me: are these claims true, or are they just reactionary responses to democratic efforts that aim to challenge and transform unjust aspects of the dominant culture? To be fair, it may not be a simple either/or situation. Some groups pushing for justice may use authoritarian tactics to get their demands met —a political methodology historically associated with Jacobinism, forms of utopian Socialism, and Maoism. However, a critical pedagogical response to the opening question might insist that a great deal of society's injustices are routinely perpetuated through institutional and social practices, which are presented and taught simply as "natural" or "normal" (Lupinacci et al., 2018; Rondini, 2020). These unjust practices, the argument follows, are designed to favor those with disproportionate social power, a concept coined by Antonio Gramsci known as "cultural hegemony" (Lears, 1985). Therefore, a critical pedagogical response might illuminate how majoritarian practices like carnism, or the Eurocentric and American exceptionalist perspectives still pervading school curricula, function as part of a "hidden curriculum" (Perera, 2024) that subtly socializes people into the values and norms that ideologically reproduce power for those

who benefit from the social structure. Research in critical pedagogy routinely examines how "normal" practices across both school environs and the larger society in which schools participate foster forms of hidden curriculum. Moreover, some work in this movement, following the traditions of Deschooling and Unschooling, even suggests that the institution of school itself—not just what takes place within it—serves as a hidden curriculum that works against the inherent freedom of those it claims to serve (Peixer, 2024; Prakash & Esteva, 2008). Perhaps the charge of "cult" against forms of socially just educational practices should be explored as a relevant description of the very hegemonic bloc of ruling social power, along with its institutions of control like schools.

The origins of the educational system were rooted in the belief that the system could hinder citizens' possible desire for rebellion against the emergent governmental and social structure that was in place post-Revolution (Pagalayan, 2022). Also, it has been declared that the nation's early educational system was a lofty attempt of the powerful to create norms of culture that favored their interests and marginalized the standing of others whose culture represented an alternative to the dominant norm (Lears, 1985). In this way, Gramsci stated that there was a "culture war" in democratic societies in which the powerful seek to create institutions that promote their ideology as foundational so that people will assimilate to it and never effectively create democratic alternatives that can be organized around to transform their social status (Lears, 1985).

However, a wide number of ruling groups, up to and including the US Executive Office, now charge themselves that the work of the educational system has been involved with indoctrination through alleged attempts to legitimate Critical Race Theory (CRT) as well as other efforts on behalf of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). These opponents claim that CRT and

DEI—tools that present knowledge about the ongoing cultural and institutional viability of White supremacy—have been used ideologically to brainwash students of all ages (Friedman & Vlady, 2024; Kelly & Taylor, 2024; Schwartz, 2021). In reaction, bans of specific literary materials have been advocated; the language that can be used about certain communities has been limited by policy; and laws restricting what educators can teach and say in the classroom have been passed. The claim here is that to enact such changes is to free schools from a hidden ideological curriculum.

However, it is possible that the educational system itself—regardless of any political or religious affiliation—functions as a tool for enculturating students to wider social and cultural norms of a given ideological system (Althusser, 1971). States define what material should be taught, and then categorize those topics into expected standards and modeled forms of curriculum. Currically, it is expected that all students (also due to compulsory enrollment laws) will be exposed to the specified materials by their teachers—whether the school be public or private. As initially noted, many (and not just those on the political right) have felt as if students are then exposed to ideologies or lifestyles in schools in ways that are not seen as appropriate by those on the outside (Schwartz, 2021).

A more recent ideology that students may have become exposed to in schools is the philosophy and culture of veganism. While only approximately 1-4% of the population (Wunsch, 2024), the vegan movement in the United States has faced significant opposition from cultural, economic, and political forces in society, and this resistance has been present in many schools as well (Lindgren, 2020). Because of this, beyond the real sense of ethical conviction also at stake, some vegans or vegan organizations have pushed their beliefs in a more rigid, absolutist manner

rather than by encouraging open, collective inquiry into the issues (Constantinou, 2023; Murti, 2012).

To reiterate: I am not arguing that either the acts of schooling or veganism (itself either inside or outside of schools) are simply authoritarian. They are not. Moreover, I am also not claiming that any indoctrinatory elements of these cultural forms are necessarily overt or even intended—to the latter, we might think analogously to antiracists' point about the difference between intention and impact (Meadows & Wickner, 2020). While naming and resisting overt forms of indoctrination is paramount for a critical democratic educator (Romanish, 1995), we must also recognize the systemic aspects of the power that informs authority; and in keeping a systems view it can be noted that as with Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, authoritarian power often functions as a hidden curriculum in spaces that value democratic knowledge and practice.

The Hidden Curriculum

There is a hidden curriculum present in every school building in the United States—whether it is realized by a wide population or not (Azimpour & Khalizade, 2015). This hidden curriculum is a prominent feature of the educational system, and it is constantly circulated by the curriculum. Another way that this hidden curriculum manifests itself is by promoting hidden biases that people do not recognize or understand that they hold, which then are replicated in the classroom environment. This hidden curriculum can unconsciously seep into the language present in the classroom environment, in which cases such language could be said to be used as a tool for indoctrination (Giroux, 2023).

This hidden curriculum does the work of systemic cultural hegemony and it is therefore a needed democratic goal of educational researchers " to uncover the ways in which the hidden curriculum functions in the daily routines, curricular content, and social relations" (Jay, 2003, p. 8) of people in their educational spaces like schools. While those seeking to document hidden curriculum often look to the hegemonic norms, values, and beliefs uncritically carried and reproduced in learning, the compulsory aspect of school learning also figures strongly in this. Scholars such as Paul Goodman and Ivan Illich notably criticized the compulsory and hidden curricular nature of school practices due to the similarity such practices may have to authoritarian groups that promote strict conformity and confinement as education. As Peixer (2024) wrote, "Illich [revealed] the inefficiency of the school at all its levels, as an institution of confinement. He [questioned] the system that encourage[d] everyone to access an education that, guided by socio-economic relations, [was] directly linked and dominated by the vision of education as a pre-formatted product" (p. 5). The educational system was not a one-size-fits-all situation, even though the development of the system itself created that effect. Therefore, this effect created a compulsory education model that demanded that all children fall into this structure in order to succeed inside and outside of the classroom. Goodman (1964) stated in his revolutionary body of work that "[it] is said that our schools are geared to middle-class values, but this is a false and misleading use of terms. The schools less and less represent any human values, but simply an adjustment to a mechanical system" (p. 10).

So the problem for a critical democratic educator here is, in a sense, two-fold: the powerful institution (on behalf of a larger system) prescribes both *what* one must learn and that one *must learn* it. As I will attempt to illuminate in this dissertation through the use of Steven Hassan's

BITE (Behavior Control, Information Control, Thought Control, and Emotional Control) Model of cultic and authoritarian groups, I have repeatedly in my time as a democratic vegan educator run up against cultic forces in education. This work, then, constitutes a critical pedagogical practice in reflection on my situations in the attempt to name the problem(s) therein, while speaking back and standing up to them.

Relationship to Topic

I have always held a strong opinion on animal cruelty. Some of my earliest memories include seeing my grandfather murder a squirrel in cold blood and watching my father gut a deer on the back of his pickup truck. I remember being constantly given bacon to eat, which I had to smother in strawberry or chocolate syrup to bypass the taste of it in my mouth. My father consistently cooked me pork steak, which I had to choke down numerous times to ensure I was fed. By the time I entered my teenage years, I was requesting that my mother purchase soy milk and veggie burgers. They were not as advanced as they are today, so my mother bought them for me a few times before I stopped consuming them altogether.

Before I entered college for my undergraduate degree, I made a bucket list in the depths of my drafts on the now-discontinued Facebook Notes. The two prominent features of my bucket list were to stop eating meat and to obtain a doctorate degree; that had been my mission ever since I put my hand to the keyboard. A few months later, I gave up all meat except chicken until my friend dared me to go without chicken for thirty days. I have not eaten it since, so I have won the bet many times over. Immediately after earning my undergraduate degree, I entered a Master's program. During that time, I had my wisdom teeth removed, and that was when I decided to start fresh as a vegan.

The time between receiving my Master's, entering the public education sector as a special education teacher, and starting the doctoral program was a bigger challenge than I had anticipated. Even though I kept an image with a checklist of degrees—with Bachelor's and Master's degrees checked off and the doctoral program listed as a to-do task—on my desk, entering the doctoral program felt like an unachievable dream. Two years into teaching in the public school system, I was bullied and interrogated into resigning because of my sexual orientation. I eventually found employment at a day treatment facility that focused on student behavior, where I encountered less pain than in the public school from the physical violence my students liberally inflicted on me.

Shortly after I started my brutal-sounding employment at the day treatment facility, a bigger challenge arose: the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, pursuing a doctoral degree was the last thing on my mind. I spent the majority of my time putting together one-thousand-piece puzzles while listening to an abundance of podcasts. By this point, I had been vegan for approximately four years. One day, I was messing around on Google and typed in "vegan PhD program." This led me to the Humane Education program website, which eventually led me to Antioch because of its affiliation with that program. The podcasts I had been listening to activated within me an interest in cultic groups. It truly made me wonder how people were so naïve and vulnerable that they could be recruited into these groups. The first cultic group I examined was the Jonestown massacre because I was so intrigued by how one man could convince a thousand people to drink a cyanide-laced beverage in hopes of revolutionary suicide (Crockford, 2018). I then studied Scientology and how it gathered finances from members and

used it against them (Rinder, 2022). I applied to Antioch with an even more heightened interest in cultic groups.

My constant fascination with the development of cultic groups and how they attracted a wide range of members led me down a path to questioning many long-standing structures present in the society of the United States—specifically the systems that I had gravitated to, including the educational system and the vegan social movement. As I progressed through the program at Antioch, I realized that these systems, in which I had placed faith, exhibited many cultic tendencies. Therefore, I concluded from a critical and reflective position, à la transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), that the practice of mainstream teaching and even forms of the subculture of the vegan movement could be classified as taxonomically resembling more the work of cultic groups than emancipatory democratic inquiry. There were a tremendous number of seemingly authoritarian practices in each of these systems, which dashed my hopes of illuminating social justice in education.

I also understood the implications of my study, as the current events of the last five years had made the expansion of my ideas not only justified but more necessary than ever. I had always been strongly interested in following the political spectrum and first voted for Barack Obama for President when I was eligible. However, I was strongly disappointed when Donald Trump unleashed his political campaign after what I initially thought was a horrid joke. I remembered staying up all night watching the election results, confident that we would have our first female president. When the results showed Donald Trump winning the election, I went into mourning; I wore black lipstick and my "A Woman's Place is in the House and the Senate" sweater for days.

As his influence continued even after his presidency, I became angrier and angrier. He practically crafted his cult-like group (Hassan, 2019) that is still present to this day. After the January 6th insurrection, I immediately designed a poster board that read "Arrest Trump for Treason" and placed it in my living room window. My mother had to convince me to take it down because she sincerely feared that the Trump-supporting neighbors would retaliate against me. I also used to respond to Trump's reckless tweets with my commentary, but my mother convinced me to stop doing so as well.

However, many current events were unfolding at that time. For example, the introduction of Project 2025 became a prominent fixture of the conservative right wing, who, as a collective whole, were infatuated with eliminating the rights of citizens. This campaign was planned for initiation in the event that Donald Trump won the 2024 election to dismantle the government (Montgomery, 2023). In tandem with Project 2025, Donald Trump and his campaign developed what they deemed Agenda 47, in which they agreed to a plan to dismantle the Department of Education, eliminate Head Start services, stop funding Title I schools, and remove all "wokeness" in schools by any means necessary (Montgomery, 2023). They hoped that the Christian religion would become more prominent in the educational arena and that their project would dictate the actions of the United States government, giving them the power to control everyone in existence.

The state of Louisiana had already taken the lead from this plan by fully incorporating Christianity into every state-funded classroom from kindergarten to university level. This was achieved by legally requiring that the Ten Commandments be visibly posted in every classroom (Cline, 2024). These events provided me with a glimpse into how all my experiences in this area

were fully connected to my study. To me, this vision was apocalyptic and had the potential to come to fruition. I had witnessed firsthand how the beliefs of this specific agenda had infiltrated my daily life and how they could be seen as indoctrination practices, not only in the classroom but also in everyday life.

In my study, I have thus used analytic autoethnography to explore my position as a vegan teacher with a deep interest in cultic groups. This required me to ask myself vital questions that challenged my own deeply held views, ethics, and norms. Had I unknowingly been drawn into cultic behavior? Was I, in turn, enlisting others into the same through my teaching methods? Or, was I engaged in critical educational "deprogramming" that helped raise awareness of anti-democratic cultic forms and hidden curricula in our social and educational spaces? Ultimately, my study required me to interrogate myself regarding my position in the educational community and how I could use that positionality to effectively answer my own questions.

Research Questions

My research questions encompassed the intersections of three different areas: the educational system, the vegan movement, and the inclusion of cultic traits in each. These entities and their relation to cultic traits were analyzed through Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups. The answers discovered from the research assisted in identifying the implications of these systems that exhibited cultic traits, as well as solutions to the existing problems. Therefore, my research questions included:

- What are common elements of and within schooling that can be identified as authoritarian and thus resembling documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups?

- What are common elements of and within the vegan movement that can be identified as resembling documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups?

- How can I learn through this study to create greater space for critical "deprogramming" of normalized educational procedures within these areas of my work and life?

Purpose Statement

My work gravitated toward the extension of studying cultic groups via Hassan's BITE model. The BITE (Behavior Control, Information Control, Thought Control, and Emotional Control) model was an expansive focus on how influence could be studied along a continuum (Hassan, 2021, p. 4). The continuum was based on a collection of characteristics exhibited by authoritarian groups; these characteristics were divided into four categories: behavior control, information control, thought control, and emotional control. The four categories were then subdivided into various characteristics that an authoritarian group displayed to influence members. Furthermore, these characteristics aligned with those visible in a majority of cultic groups.

Dr. Steven Hassan's roots in analyzing cult-like entities followed his brief tenure in the "Moonies" cult as a young adult in the late seventies. He started his career off as someone who assisted in the deprogramming of people who have left destructive cult groups; he has continued this work to this day as a researcher, educator, and clinical health professional. His organization —The Freedom of Mind Organization—provides relevant information and tools to scholars, media sources, as well as people seeking to eliminate undue influence in their lives. Undue

influence is a term in relation to the aspect of mind control (Freedom of Mind Resource Center, n.d.).

His research has led to four books and an endless stream of blog posts. Additionally, he received his Doctorate from Fielding Graduate Institute where he incorporated his design of the BITE Model into his doctoral work—in which was "[derived] from the work of Robert Jay Lifton, Edgar Schein, Margaret Singer, and psychiatrist Louis Jolyon West, all of whom were involved in researching communist brainwashing" (Hassan, 2021, p. 50). He has used this framework to explore many groups and their association to undue influence — including how Donald Trump's supporters have been considered to be members of a cult-like group (Hassan, 2019).

The BITE Model has been used as a source of hope as well as a framework for the analyzation of groups that may have potentially ties to mind control tactics. "Since 1988, tens of thousands of people have reported that the BITE model has helped them to identify their involvement in a destructive cult, enabling them to exit and reclaim their power" (Hassan, 2021, p. 50). Overall, Dr. Hassan's work has motivated people to help themselves and/or their loved ones exit destructive groups.

The incorporation of the BITE model allowed the aspects of Hassan's study to apply to my work outside of the doctoral program as a teacher, as well as in other elements of my life. Additionally, it provided evidence advocating for greater critical reflection on various institutions affiliated with education to reduce authoritarian practices while fostering more democratic attitudes. By using my own life and work as the central lens, I did not seek to turn this autoethnographic study into an autobiography but rather to explore some of the core educational

institutions or movements to which my adult life has been committed to critical analysis. In this way, my long-standing personal interest in cultic groups, my work as an educator and student of education, and my practice as a vegan all found integration in this study. This allowed me to reflect holistically and transformatively on the world I inhabit and aspire to work ethically within.

Importance of Study

Although the study is of a somewhat taboo nature (e.g., schools as cults?), it still holds an unexpected amount of importance, as the recent evidence of strong authoritarian political attitudes within the United States perhaps makes plain. Scholars, as well as the general public, need to better realize the origins of the educational system and the rationale behind its creation in order to better contextualize claims about harm done within it. Also, it is important for the aforementioned to provide information on how these traits are still in play and still prominent in the current educational system. This will reduce the amount of groupthink that is occurring in the US educational system due to the details provided in the study regarding the amount of cult-like behavior occurring in the schools.

The study also further establishes the need for further scholarship on the vegan movement, and particularly within the school setting. It is my hope that it raises awareness amongst scholars about the limits set by the carnivorous community toward those who wish to be actively vegan within educational settings. Many health courses presented to students of all ages incorporate a nutrition unit. However, the vegan diet is rarely mentioned in these courses, as the carnivorous diet takes extreme prominence whenever the food pyramid and nutrition are discussed (Cole & Stewart, 2016). The default lifestyle promoted to students through educational materials and the

like is overwhelmingly carnivorous. Any and all critical educational scholarship on this form of hidden curriculum remains needed and so offers potential importance, however humble its contribution.

Researcher Assumptions

In conducting the study, I held the assumption that the educational system works to isolate those who choose to go against its pre-established curricular and pedagogical norms, either by questioning the system itself or by pursuing an alternative lifestyle, such as veganism, that does not conform to these norms. Additionally, I assumed that the educational system exhibited numerous characteristics aligning with those of cultic groups. These assumptions were informed by examples and evidence viewed in multiple case studies.

I also assumed that those who follow a vegan lifestyle and diet are routinely targeted by micro-aggressions by individuals who adhere to a carnivorous lifestyle. This was evident to me in the language I often encountered that was used to describe veganism, both in the presence and absence of vegans. Society often proclaimed that the vegan diet was void of protein and vitamins (Weikert et al., 2020). Furthermore, it was commonly argued that following a vegan lifestyle was associated with the dismantling of masculinity due to its heavy inclusion of soy and the hormone estrogen (Salmen & Dhont, 2023).

Limitations and Delimitations

A key limitation of this study was that, being autoethnographic, even with methodological attention, it may have slanted toward my assumptions and biases. As such, despite its attempt to be analytical, the study was not as widely generalizable in its findings as other forms of inquiry might be. Additionally, while the study supported and evidenced its claims, I had to focus

particularly on a limited set of personal stories and accounts to draw broader and systemic conclusions. Another key limitation was simply the relatively short amount of time in which I undertook and completed the study.

A delimitation of the study was a focus on aspects of my life connected to school and vegan practice as further delimited by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups. I focused primarily on my experiences of relevant research claims, and that research was primarily delimited as understood via a critical pedagogical lens. Additionally, while I could have included research on the vegetarian movement in both schools and the wider society, I further delimited the study to focus on veganism specifically. Lastly, the research I engaged in was focused on the United States educational system and overall vegan movement; all of the research was conducted in English.

Definition of Terms

There were a multitude of terms that existed within this spectrum; some of these terms did not have consistent definitions that aligned with each other. For all intents and purposes of this proposal, I defined the following terms based on accumulated definitions from various sources:

BITE Model: The BITE Model was a diagram created by Dr. Steven Hassan that detailed the various ways cultic groups used "systematic control of behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions to keep them dependent and obedient" (Hassan, 2024, p. 82). These aspects included the analysis of a group by studying how they used behavior control, information control, thought control, and emotional control to manipulate an individual as well as the overall group.

Cultic group: A cultic group was one that initially appeared to attract members by promising them a greater sense of self through serving humanity via a certain doctrine.

Deprogramming: Deprogramming referred to the process that occurred during the transition of being a member of a cult to rejoining society as unaffiliated with that group.

Hidden curriculum: The hidden curriculum referred to a bias that was not spoken aloud but was implied through educational materials. An example of this could have been a meat-centric lifestyle due to its visibility in society.

Indoctrination: Indoctrination referred to when an individual was conditioned to believe a theory or idea by a source larger than themselves.

Recruitment: Recruitment referred to when a cultic group (or individual members) heavily pursued a certain target in multiple ways to establish their membership in the group.

Vegan: Someone who identified with the vegan movement was someone who did not consume any products or by-products of an animal. Typically, these products included meat, fish, dairy, eggs, milk, cheese, and any other derivatives of the aforementioned. Many people had conflicting opinions regarding the consumption of honey.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of Cultic Groups

Even after a multitude of academic studies around the subject, there is still not a concrete definition of the term "cult." The Britannica Dictionary (2023) states that a cult is "a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous." Albeit the definition has the word religion in it, a cultic group is not exclusively related to religious practices or doctrine. The word is also used loosely in modern-day language to describe any concept that has developed some kind of significant following that is not fully understood by society. However, the characteristics of cultic groups are ubiquitous even if scholars are not able to agree on the full definition. These characteristics are applied through the apparatus of a leader or organization who provides a sense of community, fosters a sense of identity, and plays on the emotions of people. Most of the time, the leader or organization expects the members to contribute time and money to them—with extreme cases of cultic groups expecting people to lay down their lives. When members try to leave, they are usually threatened, guilted, or blackmailed to not deflect from the group. Ultimately, participants are isolated by a charismatic leader by using "mind control, a corruption of the individual will survive in favor of the collective" (Crockford, 2018, p. 94). The leader determines what they want the followers to think and believe, and therefore uses that to win the loyalty of the individual. They make the individual feel as if they need to conform to the beliefs of the whole environment to be accepted. Usually, these types of groups do the most recruiting by using the grassroots approach or the love-bombing approach; the love-bombing approach requires people to develop relationships that appear on the surface to be sincere. Eventually,

these relationships morph into unhealthy relationships that become dependent on an individual or a group to feel accepted.

However, due to the ever-changing presence of social media in our world, "[it is] possible that our traditional definitions of what constitutes a cult organization will have to adapt to the internet age and a new model of crowdsourced cult" (Heller, 2021). Cultic groups now have to cultivate unique ways to recruit members via the online social platforms that now exist in today's modern age. They create an aesthetic on their online platforms that promotes a better life as well as a better self with someone affiliated with their organization. They also accommodate their potential members by providing the language on their social media posts that provide a sense of purpose.

A huge characteristic that is present in cultic groups is the authority's usage of language to convince potential members to join their group. The rhetoric that is prominently used in these cultic groups is "[the] medium through which belief systems are manufactured, nurtured, and reinforced, their fanaticism fundamentally could not exist without them" (Montell, 2021, p. 14). Without significant rhetoric, movements could not exist. As Crockford (2018) notes, "The persistence of this language is rooted in its flexibility, not its accuracy. It stands for more than simply the delivery mechanism: it stands for the poisoning of the mind by another; how the authority of a few can take over and dictate the terms of life and death to the many" (p. 107). The rhetoric applied is ultimately the tool for how they obtain and keep members in the group. Montell (2021) further concludes, "Language is the key means by which all degrees of cult-like

influence occur" (p. 14). If there was no language being used to attract followers, then there would not be any cult groups or social movements that exist in the world.

The act of indoctrination has played a major role in determining whether or not a group falls into the category of cult. Initially, the term indoctrination was synonymous with mind control and brainwashing tactics. However, today "[a] pejorative meaning is now firmly attached to the word indoctrination. A much older use of the word as a synonym for instruction was gradually overtaken by another that now clearly connotes moral wrongdoing. This linguistic shift provokes a question: What is the distinctive wrong allegedly done when accusations of indoctrination are made?" (Callan & Arena, 2010, p. 105). Many cultic groups force their members to become carbon copies of each other, implementing a strict amount of conformity in their indoctrination practices. There does not appear to be much if any room for a member to stand out or to make themselves visible as individuated—unless they are in the higher group that overshadows the rest of the group.

To combat the ideologies of these types of groups, Dr. Steven Hassan developed the BITE model. This model "describes cults' specific methods to recruit and maintain control over people. "BITE" stands for Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional control" (Hassan, 2021). The BITE Model was built upon the four tenets and how they correlate with how many groups with the label of "cultic" operate. This model is easily aligned with a multitude of cultic groups and can be heavily used to describe the educational system as well as its origins and its current state. It is also a great tool to inform practitioners and people in general about how cultic groups obtain long-lasting memberships that take over a person's life for an extended amount of

time—and also how to combat these tactics that have been acquired by these groups for their

recruitment strategies.

Figure 1

Dr. Steven Hassan's BITE Model

BITE MODEL

I. Behavior Control

1. Regulate individual's physical reality
2. Dictate where, how, and with whom the member lives and associates or isolates
3. When, how and with whom the member has sex
4. Control types of clothing and hairstyles
5. Regulate diet - food and drink, hunger and/or fasting
6. Manipulation and deprivation of sleep
7. Financial exploitation, manipulation or dependence
8. Restrict leisure, entertainment, vacation time
9. Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals and/or self indoctrination including the Internet
10. Permission required for major decisions
11. Thoughts, feelings, and activities (of self and others) reported to superiors
12. Rewards and punishments used to modify behaviors, both positive and negative
13. Discourage individualism, encourage group-think
14. Impose rigid rules and regulations
15. Punish disobedience by beating, torture, burning, cutting, rape, or tattooing/branding
16. Threaten harm to family and friends
17. Force individual to rape or be raped
18. Instill dependency and obedience
19. Encourage and engage in corporal punishment

II. Information Control

1. Deception:
   a. Deliberately withhold information
   b. Distort information to make it more acceptable
   c. Systematically lie to the cult member
2. Minimize or discourage access to non-cult sources of information, including:
   a. Internet, TV, radio, books, articles, newspapers, magazines, other media
   b. Critical information
   c. Former members
   d. Keep members busy so they don't have time to think and investigate
   e. Control through cell phone with texting, calls, internet tracking
3. Compartmentalize information into Outsider vs. Insider doctrines
   a. Ensure that information is not freely accessible
   b. Control information at different levels and missions within group
   c. Allow only leadership to decide who needs to know what and when
4. Encourage spying on other members
   a. Impose a buddy system to monitor and control member
   b. Report deviant thoughts, feelings and actions to leadership
   c. Ensure that individual behavior is monitored by group
5. Extensive use of cult-generated information and propaganda, including:
   a. Newsletters, magazines, journals, audiotapes, videotapes, YouTube, movies and other media
   b. Misquoting statements or using them out of context from non-cult sources
6. Unethical use of confession
   a. Information about sins used to disrupt and/or dissolve identity boundaries
   b. Withholding forgiveness or absolution
   c. Manipulation of memory, possible false memories.

III. Thought Control

1. Require members to internalize the group's doctrine as truth
   a. Adopting the group's 'map of reality' as reality
   b. Instill *black and white* thinking
   c. Decide between *good* vs. *evil*
   d. Organize people into *us* vs. *them* (*insiders* vs. *outsiders*)
2. Change person's name and identity
3. Use of loaded language and clichés which constrict knowledge, stop critical thoughts and reduce complexities into platitudinous buzz words
4. Encourage only 'good and proper' thoughts
5. Hypnotic techniques are used to alter mental states, undermine critical thinking and even to age regress the member
6. Memories are manipulated and false memories are created
7. Teaching thought-stopping techniques which shut down reality testing by stopping negative thoughts and allowing only positive thoughts, including:
   a. Denial, rationalization, justification, wishful thinking
   b. Chanting
   c. Meditating
   d. Praying
   e. Speaking in tongues
   f. Singing or humming
8. Rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism
9. Forbid critical questions about leader, doctrine, or policy allowed
10. Labeling alternative belief systems as illegitimate, evil, or not useful
11. Instill new "map of reality"

IV. Emotional Control

1. Manipulate and narrow the range of feelings – some emotions and/or needs are deemed as evil, wrong or selfish
2. Teach emotion-stopping techniques to block feelings of homesickness, anger, doubt
3. Make the person feel that problems are always their own fault, never the leader's or the group's fault
4. Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness, such as
   a. Identity guilt
   b. You are not living up to your potential
   c. Your family is deficient
   d. Your past is suspect
   e. Your affiliations are unwise
   f. Your thoughts, feelings, actions are irrelevant or selfish
   g. Social guilt
   h. Historical guilt
5. Instill fear, such as fear of:
   a. Thinking independently
   b. The outside world
   c. Enemies
   d. Losing one's salvation
   e. Leaving or being shunned by the group
   f. Other's disapproval
6. Extremes of emotional highs and lows – love bombing and praise one moment and then declaring you are horrible sinner
7. Ritualistic and sometimes public confession of sins
8. Phobia indoctrination: inculcating irrational fears about leaving the group or questioning the leader's authority
   a. No happiness or fulfillment possible outside of the group
   b. Terrible consequences if you leave: hell, demon possession, incurable diseases, accidents, suicide, insanity, 10,000 reincarnations, etc.
   c. Shunning of those who leave; fear of being rejected by friends and family
   d. Never a legitimate reason to leave; those who leave are weak, undisciplined, unspiritual, worldly, brainwashed by family or counselor, or seduced by money, sex, or rock and roll
   e. Threats of harm to ex-member and family

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Origins of the Educational System

To understand the current state of the educational system, it is vital to explore the historical context of its creation. According to Paglayan (2022), the educational system was initially developed in Prussia with the primary aim of teaching citizens skills that would prevent them from revolting against their government. By conditioning students to comply with authority and discouraging critical thought, governments maintained control over their populations. The system emphasized obedience and conformity over intellectual autonomy, effectively shaping individuals to fit predetermined societal roles.

In the early formulation of the United States educational system, despite its modern association with career preparation and higher education, the initial purpose was not occupational training. As Janak (2019) explains, "[schooling was not for occupational preparation unless that occupation was the ministry]" (p. 10). This focus on religious leadership aimed to preserve hierarchical social structures by "[preventing other] aspirations from emerging [as well as] to prevent education from empowering the masses" (Paglayan, 2022, p. 1247). Schooling during this period was not centered on academic advancement but rather on moral and social conditioning. Paglayan (2022) observes that its primary focus was "[eradicating] 'the great body of vices and crimes that sadden and torment the community,' 'softening the habits' of the 'savage' and 'barbarian' masses, and engendering among them 'disgust towards violence and the shedding of blood'" (p. 1246). By addressing grievances and instilling compliance early, such education served as a preventative measure against dissent, ensuring the perpetuation of elite power over the young nation. Consequences for questioning authority reinforced this conformity, shaping a population unwilling to challenge the status quo (Paglayan, 2024).

As Hannah-Jones et al. (2021) demonstrate in the *1619 Project*, the educational system was originally designed for and by those who were White and wealthy. Before the reconstruction that occurred after the Civil War, public education was almost non-existent in the Southern United States. The White elite, who held political and economic power, typically sent their children to private schools, ensuring they received a quality education. Meanwhile, poor White children, especially those in rural areas, were often excluded from formal schooling, perpetuating a system of limited educational opportunity for the lower classes.

In stark contrast, newly freed Black people—who had been denied the right to learn during slavery—recognized education as an essential path to freedom and self-determination. For them, literacy was not only a tool for personal advancement but a means of achieving full participation in American society. These communities, once oppressed by systemic barriers, saw education as integral to the realization of true liberty (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021).

As a result, the *1619 Project* explains how Black legislators, empowered by the political shifts of Reconstruction, became strong advocates for education reform. They pushed for the creation of a universal, state-funded education system, ensuring that schooling would be available to both Black and white children. These efforts were transformative, aiming to dismantle the educational inequities of the past and lay the foundation for a more inclusive society. Furthermore, Black legislators helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the South, making school attendance mandatory for children regardless of race. This move mirrored the educational practices already established in the North, where compulsory schooling was already in place, and signaled a significant shift toward more equitable educational opportunities in the region (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021, p. 29).

To cement control over those who were not White and wealthy, state governments implemented comprehensive education laws and regulations, while nationalized regulation of schools, standardized textbooks, teacher training programs, and centralized school inspections were introduced in turn (Spring, 2019). Paglayan (2022) highlights how these measures gave states extensive power over educational content, specifying textbooks and assessing teachers' moral qualifications. This approach, which Paglayan believes was designed to suppress critical thought and cultivate compliance, has enduring implications in the United States educational system.

This centralized control is evident in modern policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Common Core State Standards (Ametepee et al., 2014; Becker, 2020). These initiatives standardize curricula, enforce accountability measures, and restrict the autonomy of educators. As Baltodano (2012) explains, under NCLB, schools are required to publish disaggregated data on student test scores and adopt specific scientific curricula to improve achievement. Teachers receive continuous training to "teach to the test" and face penalties if their students' test scores fail to meet benchmarks (Baltodano, 2012, p. 495). This rigid framework echoes the historical emphasis on obedience and conformity, marginalizing creative and individualized teaching approaches.

The roots of using standardized testing as a tool for decision-making can be traced back to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Nichols and Berliner (2007) note that the current emphasis on testing to evaluate students, teachers, and administrators, as well as entire school systems, originated with the ESEA's authorization. This act introduced federal involvement in education and solidified the role of standardized testing in assessing

accountability. This legacy persists, with testing remaining a cornerstone of policy-driven accountability measures.

The preparation of teachers has also been shaped by this legacy of control. Since the 1980s, teacher education has been systematically undermined, with traditional programs—characterized by extended residencies and coaching models—criticized as overly lengthy, expensive, and unnecessary. As Baltodano (2012) notes, alternative programs like Teach for America, supported by recent prominent figures in the educational system such as former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, have pushed for shorter preparation periods to expedite teacher certification. This shift has prioritized efficiency over quality, leaving many teachers unprepared for the complexities of the classroom. Instead of equipping educators with practical skills for the promotion of democratic learning communities, programs focus on standardized teaching strategies, delaying meaningful professional development until the often overwhelming student teaching phase.

Ultimately, the US educational system's origins lie in ideologies that claim to promote the free-thinking ethos of the "American dream" while actively discouraging deviation from established norms. The government's control over curricula, textbooks, and teacher training perpetuates a hierarchical structure designed to maintain societal stratification. As Gatto (2017) points out, the system has long served the interests of corporate and political elites, fueled with support from powerful industrialists like Carnegie and Rockefeller. These leaders "decided to bend government schooling to the service of business and the political state," using education as a means to cultivate a compliant workforce (Gatto, 2017, p. 107). This foundational ethos persists, manifesting in the restrictive policies and accountability measures that characterize

contemporary education. While often framed as promoting equality and opportunity, and while not to deny the possibility for any equity or social advancement to be gained therein, there is reasonable evidence that the educational system continues in major ways to reflect its origins as a tool for the consolidation of social power by hegemonic blocs, the maintenance of social hierarchies, and the cultural shaping of individuals to meet the demands of the political and economic elite.

Cult-Like Features of the Educational System

Azimpour and Khalizade (2015) state that "[the] school is regarded as a regenerative factor of unequal hierarchies and unfair relations in [a] society" (p. 20). A cultic group is made up of an unequal and unfair hierarchical system (Hassan, 2021). Simultaneously, schools' use of a hidden curriculum has the potential to be a gateway for students to be further recruited into a group with cult-like characteristics because the hidden curriculum in action has many similarities to the characteristics of a cultic group. For example, Azimpour and Khalizade (2015) note that those who do not succeed in the hidden curriculum are looked down upon because "[negative] perceptions are a part of the hidden curriculum. [If] the teacher humiliates a weak student, he/she might reinforce this negative attitude" (p. 20). This is similar to the behavior of a cultic group who looks down upon a specific member who does not follow the particular doctrine dictated to the group or a member who goes against the group itself (Hassan, 2021). The potential combination of indoctrination and emotional abuse in the educational system can therefore be a preparatory seed for students to become prey to other cultic groups who use related tactics to recruit and maintain their membership.

Charismatic leaders are present within a cultic group (Hassan, 2021), and they are also present in the educational system (Carter & Piccoli, 2024). Oftentimes, the leaders of the educational system are not visibly recognized; however, they still manifest complex forms of power and control in the grassroots functioning of schools. Learning, it turns out, is a highly managed set of experiences, which has parallels to cult and even national membership. Paglayan (2022) states that "national elites expanded public primary schooling to indoctrinate future citizens to accept the status quo, hoping that this would help the state carry out its most essential function: to prevent social disorder and ensure political stability" (p. 1242). Extrapolating this logic forward, when students are conditioned to believe similar things or understand them in standardized ways, then it is easier for the government to enforce the laws and regulations that they want to enforce and to manage diversity more efficiently. In line with Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, social unrest is minimized when the populace is "taught" (and how) to identify with ruling ideas, norms, and values.

Cultic groups do not like it when their members rebel against them. This is strangely similar to what the originators of the educational system anticipated would happen, so they planned to ensure that would be prevented to the best of their abilities (Gatto, 2017). They originated the public school system to prepare students for employment and obedient citizenship; additionally, they wanted to ensure that students were taught a certain way so that they did not question authority or rebel against the government (Spring, 2019). Horace Mann, the so-called founder of American public schooling and Antioch's own first President, argued foundationally for his public common schools, not as places in which a unified nation could learn to celebrate its diversity, but rather as institutions that could tame its diverse and potentially contestatory publics

which elites feared could divide the nation. As Snyder (2022) writes, "Horace Mann—first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education—and other leaders of the common school movement were terrified by the prospect of sectarian religious divides and partisan politics blowing up what was a fragile new experiment in universal education at public expense." Today, emphasis upon controlling for curricular outcomes in education combined with a predominant focus on one's capacity for learning as evidenced by standardized tests—beyond a new array of highly authoritarian educational edicts that are being issued across the majority of the country (PEN America, n.d.) and now from the Executive office of the President (Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling, 2025)—serve as potential mechanisms for creating a "one dimensional" (Marcuse, 2013) society through education. As Kincheloe (2008) has concluded, "[Such] dynamics are infrequently discussed in twenty-first century public educational discourse because little questioning of educational purpose takes place—little is allowed under the auspices of twenty-first-century political leaders" (p. 109).

When cult members speak out or leave the group, many face challenges and consequences; this is similar to students who do the same, as the social system in large degree penalizes those who abandon (or who are abandoned from) schooling (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.). However, it is hard to leave a cult and break away from its forms of indoctrination because "[once someone has] entered into the delusion, [they] are among people who have all made the same commitment, who are all similarly intent on maintaining the lie" (Heller, 2021). The cycle of indoctrination and mind control just furthers itself when it has become all a person knows. Whenever a person manages to leave, they are convinced to leave because "[rational] objections to flaws in cult doctrine or to hypocrisies on the part of a cult

leader do have a powerful impact if and when they occur to the cult members themselves. The analytical mind may be quieted by cult-think, but it is rarely deadened altogether" (Heller, 2021). It may take some time, but it is not an impossible feat to accomplish. Many people have left and overcome the systems of cultic groups, even if they still have remnants of trauma acquired from the group and participation within it.

Veganism Movement

Just like the issue of cultic groups, the issue of the vegan movement—especially in the school environment—remains a controversial topic. Many people associate the vegan movement with the dismantlement of masculinity as well as the rumored lack of vitamins (Oliver, 2023). Many people dedicate their time to asking vegans where they get their protein from and aim to argue about a theory that plants are also living, breathing creatures. In previous studies, "[eating] vegan or non-meat alternatives were generally connected with femininity (being a girl/female), which was sometimes also described as more to the left, greener and environmentally friendly" (Lindgren, 2020, p. 691). The veganism movement is currently politicized in this way and not simply a dietary lifestyle choice (Cochrane & Cojucaru, 2023).

The vegan movement started in 1944 and has continually expanded itself around the globe. Initially developed as an official organization in England, the Vegan Society molded the definition of veganism, stating that "[veganism] is a term coined by Donald Watson in 1944 to describe the voluntary abstention from animal-derived food-products and a lifestyle governed by a non-violent philosophy" (Gregson et al., 2022, p. 1). The term "vegan" was coined at that time. An official vegan movement in the United States was developed by the Vegan Society in 1948. Even though the vegan practice is not yet a century old, Gregson et al (2022) state that "[The]

concept of abstaining from animal-derived food products for ethical reasons, is said to date back some 5000 years to Ancient Egypt, was later popularized by Greek philosopher Pythagoras in around 500 BCE and has a rich tradition among several world religions" (p. 1). According to Osborn (2024), there are approximately 88 million vegans in the world today.

There are a few core beliefs and principles that drive the vegan movement. The Oxford Dictionary definition of the word "veganism" is a paragon of brevity and precision: "The practice of not eating or using any animal products." This definition involves neither a reason, nor an implied ethics of politics, nor an identification with a broader identity, but hinges on a simple refusal: the "not" (Dickstein & Dutkiewicz, 2021, p. 2). There appears to be a significant amount of not included in the lifestyle, but there have also been many generations who have followed this kind of lifestyle with no label attached. As veganism has become more and more mainstream on packaging labels and prominently displayed in modern advertisements as well as storefronts, there has been more awareness about the movement in general. However, the vegan movement is commonly associated with the vegetarianism movement even though there are significant differences that make each movement distinct from the other.

There were initially a few figures and events that have shaped the vegan movement's ideology, but mostly these have been replaced by social media influencers and media sources that have faster access to the population. "The American vegan [social] worlds have been created and sustained, in part, through popular US media (e.g., magazines such as Vegetarian Times. VegNews, and Naked Food Magazine) as well as through websites and other informational Western media" (Christopher et al., 2018, p. 1). Social media has expanded the vegan movement

online on a global scale; it has proved that online platforms have a role in vegan activism as well as recruitment into the movement (Dos Santos et al., 2023).

The rhetoric presented about veganism on social media platforms can also be an influential instrument to generate further group membership (Kadel et al., 2024). This can lead to problematic forms of identity, however. As Gregson et al. (2022) declare, "Past research has shown that interaction with an online community strengthens group identification and once a social identity is formed, against an online group, its members may be increasingly susceptible to group influence, stereotyping, and discriminating against outgroup members" (p. 3). In other words, then, when members of a group participate in a social media platform setting, they may feel peer pressure to identify as a significant part of the community, which they may do by uncritically targeting allegedly opposing views in divisive ways.

In conjunction with social media, "In recent years, films advocating veganism have been produced and widely distributed through popular streaming platforms such as Netflix" (Christopher et al., 2018, p. 7). Extensive documentary films—which can serve as practical advertisements that are easily accessible across multiple media platforms—have been released to expose animal cruelty while also exploring the purported health benefits of adopting a vegan lifestyle. The film industry has been utilized by the vegan movement because "As a multi-layered medium, film uses numerous narrative devices, including language, sound, and visual imagery. The discourse analysis of film is therefore multifaceted and multi-sensory" (Christopher et al,, 2018, p. 7). In some of these documentaries, and as can now be seen across the wider food commercial landscape, various terms (e.g., "plant-based") are used instead of the term "vegan"

so that viewers do not turn away because they think that the product constitutes propaganda for group enlistment.

Other forms of nonconventional advertising are actions such as creating t-shirts and bumper stickers that proclaim enlisting statements for and about the vegan movement (Kelaher, 2021). These elements allow a person to become a living billboard for the movement. Without making any noise or creating any protest, those involved can in this way get the word out about the movement to many more than they might initially realize.

Another way that the movement gets the word out about its mission is by starting cultural campaigns such as Meatless Mondays (Huber-Disla, 2024). These campaigns also often use words such as "meatless" instead of any direct association with veganism in order to ensure that there is not a negative association between the campaign and the movement. Singer (2017) mentioned that "[the] sparse presence of the words vegan and vegetarian on the MM website is consistent with the practice of avoiding ideologically loaded terms found elsewhere in the vegetarian movement" (p. 350). If campaigns do not advertise their affiliation with the vegan movement, then many people are more willing to participate. They are more likely to gain an audience because when the vegan affiliation is present, more people are determined to "[turn] off [videos] or avoid [listening about it], [and will] also continue eating meat after they can justify themselves with various forms of personal argumentation" (Murti, 2012, p. 132). Also, there is a prominent event that spans throughout January to promote going meatless, which is entitled Veganuary. This capitalizes on the fact that people are looking to make significant changes in their lives in January as the year rings new. The advertisements that encourage viewers to go meatless generally convince them to try it out for a month at the beginning of a new year—or at

least, a Monday or two. For the purposes of this study, it is worth noting that cultic groups often will not imply that they are a cultic group; instead, they will say that they are a group that provides safety or that is making a safer difference in a world that should be feared (Q&A with Alexandra Stein on how to identify a cult, n.d.).

It is normal to have biases against other groups. This is because "[it] is possible for a particular group or event to be portrayed in numerous ways by different claims-makers" (Christopher, 2018, p. 5). As with any topic, perspective is a vital component on how someone views their world. The perception of any topic based upon any kind of media is not an exception to that.

The vegan movement is constantly associated with the usage of emotional appeals to gather support and participants (Miguel et al., 2020). A prime example of how emotional appeals are used is the rhetorical syntax and imagery provided in a majority of information promoted by the leading organizations of the movement, specifically the most well-known establishment of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). This organization uses many different forms of "shocking" advertising techniques to identify issues created by the dominance of the animal agriculture industry as well as the environmental problems initiated by the takeover of the industries that provide the tools needed for an animal-centric lifestyle (Matusitz & Forrester, 2013).

These beliefs align with traditional cultic beliefs because a person's identity can be cultivated by the influence of the group. Ultimately, a majority of people who choose to follow the vegan movement also adopt the vegan movement as their identity. By extension, a facet of this identity often requires that people criticize and judge those who do not participate in the

movement. As Gregson et al. (2022) conclude,"Vegans [consider] their dietary choices as more central to their identity and tend to be more critical of people who, unlike themselves, do not abstain from animal products" (p. 2). Cult-like behavior aligns with these strong in-group/out-group tendencies alive within the vegan movement and so these forms of antagonistic identity are worthy of greater deliberation by those within the movement. However, these modes of belief and identity in the vegan movement differ from traditional cultic beliefs because they are not shaped by a specific leader, but rather by a plethora of figures that consistently work to shape the movement, especially influencers located in the social media realm as well as on the pages of the Internet.

The emotions of guilt, fear, and peer pressure are commonly utilized to gain supportive interactions and to obtain membership in the group (Neumann et al., 2023). Vegan activism that promotes these feelings can be understood as attempting to generate empathy for those beings who the activists claim are unable to speak and consent for themselves (Maccath-Moran, 2024) —those beings are the animals that many people consume in a variety of ways. By showing horrific images of animal neglect and slaughter as well as by describing animal cruelty in detail, as exemplified by PETA's many faceted "Meat is Murder" campaign, vegan movement activists hope to captivate non-vegans to join and also to remind vegans why they continue to participate in the movement. In exploring cult recruitment techniques Montell (2021) states that these forms of strategy are often enlisted by cults because "[former] cult recruiters said that their ideal candidates were good-natured, service-minded, and sharp." Cult recruiters know what type of person they are looking to find, so they use tailored language to attract people based on their emotions and not generally their levels of intellect.

The vegan movement attracts new followers differently than the traditional cultic group may do so but still shares many commonalities with them. Christopher et al. (2018) explored the recruitment linkages between the vegan movement and marginal religious groups, finding that "Both are defined by their cultural distinctiveness and efforts to share a non-mainstream worldview" (p. 3). Some conversion techniques in the vegan movement include, but are not limited to: shock value; usage of intense advertisements; the creation of documentary films; purposefully omitting the term vegan from elements of their promotions; using members as walking advertisements; and trying to cater to non-vegans by promoting special events that do not feel restrictive.

Still, many within the vegan movement (led arguably by the work of PETA in this way) primarily relies on shock value to gain the attention of the general public and to generate prospective converts for the group and movement. Many cultic groups will use shocking practices to recruit new members via persuasion. For a brief example, Jim Jones conducted so-called faith healings that were later found to be orchestrated by false means (Crockford, 2018, p. 98). PETA runs outlandish advertisements, and many of them feature gruesome imagery that purports to represent what happens in the settings of factory farms and slaughterhouses. This is due to "[the] eyes [being] the center of visual rhetoric activities, such as looking, seeing, and visualizing" (Murti, 2012, p. 125). Simultaneously, PETA's advertisements use the aforementioned emotional appeals to make clear how the images are intended to make the viewer feel. An example of this was featured in a PETA ad where "[the] narrator [mentioned] in the beginning, 'Millions of compassionate people leave meat off their plates for good'. While he

[said] that, the [images projected chickens] in [cages who looked like they were suffering]"

(Murti, 2012, p. 130). PETA knows that many people have conscious feelings of compassion and

disgust about displays that feature animal cruelty and animals who are in visible pain. Using such

visual rhetoric, then, plays on many people's empathetic qualities as it attempts to convince them

to make some sort of change in their diet or to join the vegan movement. But it can also be

argued that the carnivores protesting the vegan movement may display characteristics that also

relate to cultic groups, and they too often use and rely upon social media to enlist membership

and demonize their vegan opposition (Gregson et al., 2022) in ways that seeks not just to inform

people but to capture their very identity for larger group aims.

The topic of veganism in schools is also a source of taboo conversation for the larger

majority. Just as the incorporation of social justice or other alleged diversity, equity, and

inclusion issues has been perceived by many as a form of "brainwashing" (Bialystok, 2014),

veganism as a philosophical practice is also looked upon often as a topic of indoctrination as it is

a direct deviation from the prevailing cultural norm (Weber et al., 2022).

The norm for the public educational system in the United States is dominated by the meat

and dairy industries (Peterson, 2014). It is hidden but present throughout the school building

through cafeteria offerings as well as in other formats and interactions. As Spannring and

Grušovnik (2019) state, "Meat eating is embedded in the generally anthropocentric and speciesist

Western culture that also plays out in non-formal and formal learning contexts, which normalize

the confinement, manipulation, use, and killing of nonhuman animals" (p. 1191). While meat

eaters and non-vegans may not typically be loudly proclaiming their love of meat and hatred of

veganism in school halls, the sentiment in the form of hidden curriculum can undoubtedly be found therein not uncommonly.

Therefore, vegans in schools are targets for the already pre-established fears and mockeries of their culture, when nonvegans are triggered to distinguish and identify with a carnist cultural identity that is hegemonically present in modern society. "Vegans can just as easily encounter microaggressions and microinequities in the school as they can in the larger society. While some schools have moved to try to incorporate a consistent vegetarian (and sometimes vegan) offering on the menu, the overall reality is that vegans are still treated like second-class citizens in most school cafeterias," concludes Kahn (2011, p. 7). When people declare that they are vegan, they often find themselves thrust into a marginalizing debate about the soundness of their philosophy that likewise implies that it is clearly unsound (Common Responses When You Tell…, 2018).

Cafeteria food is sponsored by the meat and dairy industries which funnel funds to schools to promote an animal consumption-based lifestyle (Center for Biological Diversity, n.d.; Torrella, 2024). At the top, the funding is generated from lobbyists who work hand-in-hand with government officials. As Kahn (2011) notes, "[schools] across the country have utilized dairy industry materials in this fashion because it is tacitly demanded by the USDA's National School Lunch Program, the primary governmental vehicle through which food that is in over-supply is promoted and national prices thereby subsidized" (p. 8). It can be inferred that the government is a direct player in the choices that are mandated for the cafeteria food in the school building (Briefel et al., 2009). In turn, schools depend on the government to fund their food purchases and must follow the standards implemented to continue receiving those sources of funds. "[Schools]

are only reimbursed for their food expenses by the program unless they promote items like milk, which it has deemed [as] a nutritional good" Kahn (2011, p. 8) informs. The schools, then, must visibly promote the consumption of products such as milk to remain in good standing with the regulations set by the USDA program (Kraak et al., 2022).

One way that the schools advertise the concept of an animal-centric lifestyle is by using visuals to attract attention (Kraak et al., 2022). The Got Milk campaign was established to advertise the dairy industry through environments and media options that were meant to be consumed by younger generations. These editorials and photographs with celebrities posing with a milk mustache were supposed to excite youth. The photographs were generally placed as jumbo-sized posters in school cafeterias in the hopes of influencing naive youth. There have been prominent examples of educators and students attempting to have schools remove these banners. As Kahn (2011) recounts, "[An educator had] his sights on asking for the removal of the National Dairy Council's "Got Milk?" and other promotional posters which adorned the lunch room walls, and when the school's cafeteria manager refused to take them down, [the educator] and his students posted their vegan posters satirizing the issue" (p. 7). This did not conclude very well due to the nature of the protest, as it went against the norm and so was looked down upon— especially as it occurred in an educational setting in the United States. However, the example shows that vegan educators recognize "[the] need for transformative learning: in school communities, youth work, community development, organizational learning as well as political engagement, for example, for the phasing out of government subsidies for factory farming" (Spannring & Grušovnik, 2019, p. 1196). Oftentimes, undoubtedly these practices need to take place inside of a classroom or school to reach more young people.

Overall, educators can help assist in the awareness of the vegan movement by incorporating it into their classroom to challenge students to think for themselves—regardless of whether the teachers or students are vegan or not. "Through active incorporation of appropriate forms of procedural, effectiveness, and social knowledge into the K-12 classroom, educators can empower the next generation to make individual changes based on their vision of the future and insist on structural and institutional changes that are essential for a successful transition to sustainability" counsel Redman and Redman (2014). Teachers have a hand in shaping the future through their work with children and youth who will become the next generation of adults. Helping students to become informed about the choices they make—and are asked to make—is critical if schools are to function as ethical seedbeds for democracy and not simply as institutions dedicated to reproducing forms of cultural hegemony and large-scale economic interests.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

This research project was a study analyzing the interconnections between the educational system, the vegan movement throughout the aforementioned educational system, and the facets of cultic groups that I deduced as possibly present in the confluence of each as a vegan democratic educator. The data was collected in support of an autoethnographic inquiry and analyzed through the same lens, using myself as the primary research subject as well as the central participant of the study.

The Method

The method of inquiry I employed in this study was autoethnography, a qualitative research design that places the researcher's personal experiences and reflections at the center of the research (Adams et al., 2022; Chang, 2008; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the intersection between my experiences within the educational system and the vegan movement, and how those experiences possibly corresponded with multiple tenets found to belong to authoritarian and cultic groups. Autoethnography was particularly well-suited for this study as it facilitated my insider perspective, providing nuanced insights into the intricate connections and lived experiences within these aspects.

Autoethnography involves the researcher's self-reflection and engagement with the researched context, allowing for a deep exploration of personal experiences and cultural perspectives (Adams et al., 2022; Chang, 2008; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). In this study, I actively reflected on the educational system and the vegan movement within schools, documenting personal experiences, observations, and reflections. My role as both an insider and an observer was crucial for capturing the complexities of these phenomena and their potential cultic

alignments.

Autoethnography served as a powerful instrument for data collection in this study due to its unique capacity to delve into the intricacies of personal experiences within the educational system and the vegan movement. Additionally, autoethnography allowed for deep reflective exploration of my own experiences, fostering a rich and potentially transformative understanding of the cultural and social dynamics at play. The incorporation of autoethnography offered a comprehensive and holistic perspective on the correlation between education, veganism, and the presence of cultic elements, contributing to a more specific exploration of these potentially interconnected phenomena.

Moreover, autoethnography was a vessel for reaching the academic community, uplifting my personal experiences and legitimizing my stories and conclusions by connecting them with scholarly discourse on the related topics, thereby humbly forwarding and further evidencing those field conversations. In this, I hoped to challenge the norms of such discourse, as well as to encourage the audience (i.e. scholars) to respond to the information presented them (Adams et al., 2022; Chang, 2008; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Many of the questions asked in studies that incorporate autoethnography can not be answered by using traditional research methods and I believe because of the idiosyncratic nature of my inquiry topic, this was true of this study.

While there are a wide variety of autoethnographic styles, Ellingson and Ellis (2008) posit that there are two broad, overarching forms: the evocative and the analytic. While evocative autoethnography provides narratives that attempt to catalyze emotional and dialogical responses by readers on their topics, "Analytic autoethnographers focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 445).

Anderson (2006) also clarifies that analytic autoethnography develops "[cultural] meanings [that are cocreated and] constituted in conversation, action, and text" (p. 383). In addition to the aforementioned facets of autoethnography, the analytic autoethnography approach develops a "[cultural] meanings [that are cocreated and] constituted in conversation, action, and text (Anderson, 2006, p. 383). This study will employ an analytic autoethnography approach in these ways. Through a self-reflective lens, I hope to identify where the movements and institutions of my interest may inadvertently (or consciously) adopt authoritarian practices, to reflect on my own feelings and experiences of the same, and to seek to document ways through education to foster more open, democratic, and critically engaged environments.

Data Collection

In this research endeavor, data collection was a multi-faceted process that emphasized the intertwining realms of personal experiences, external observations, relevant literature, as well as critical reflections upon these sources and their common themes. Each method employed aligned with the overarching objective of exploring the intricate connections between the educational system, the vegan movement within school settings, and the respective potential affiliations with tenets reminiscent of a cultic group.

To structure the study with the specifications of autoethnography, the following were utilized to collect valuable data: my recollection of previous experiences; the analysis and observation of myself; and my reflection on the topics.

Data Analysis

A variety of strategies were used to analyze the collected data. These strategies included thematic analysis; cultural analysis; reflective analysis; triangulation; and contextual analysis.

Thematic analysis was used for "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes" (Nowell et al., 2017) within the collected data. The analysis involved coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and exploring relationships between the educational system, vegan movement, and potential cultic tenets. My reflections were integrated into the analysis, enriching the interpretation with personal insights. Codes were distinguished by using the tenets of Dr. Hassan's BITE Model (Hassan, 2021). The subsequent stage, selective coding, refined and solidified the identified themes, focusing on the most prominent ones that emerged (Creswell, 2013). This involved revisiting the data to ensure that the themes accurately represented the diverse range and depth of experiences within the educational system, the vegan movement, and potential cultic influences. As the thematic coding process evolved, the emphasis shifted toward theme development, necessitating a thorough exploration and interpretation of each identified theme (Gibbs, 2007). Additionally, the process of thematic coding itself allowed for the revisitation, refinement, or introduction of new codes and themes as the analysis progressed. This ensured a dynamic and all-encompassing comprehension of the interconnected phenomena under investigation. In essence, thematic coding operated as a systematic and well-structured approach, revealing meticulous insights into the intricate relationships between educational experiences, involvement in the vegan movement, and potential cultic influences within the context of this study.

I also employed reflective analysis (Billups, 2021) as a valuable approach to thoroughly examine the collected data within the course of the study. This method involved a scrutiny of personal narratives, with a particular focus on my reflections and insights derived from experiences within the educational system and the vegan movement. In adopting this analytical

approach, I critically assessed the evolving dynamics of my role as both participant and observer. The exploration extended to the intersections between personal experiences and the broader cultural and social contexts, aiming to reveal implicit assumptions, biases, and shifts in perspectives over time. This introspective analysis contributed to a deeper understanding of my changing positionality and its potential impact on data interpretation. Additionally, reflective analysis (Creswell, 2013) facilitated a nuanced exploration of the emotional dimensions embedded in the data, offering insights into my affective responses and the emotional resonance of the studied phenomena, both as qualitative resources and potential sources of bias. Through this process, I acquired a more profound understanding of the intricate interplay between my feelings about education, veganism, and potential cultic influences, thereby enhancing the depth and reflexivity of the overall data analysis.

In the exploration of the intricate dynamics among the educational system, the vegan movement in schools, and potential cultic influences, I also strategically employed triangulation (Denzin, 2012) as a methodological approach to data analysis. This deliberate choice emphasized the integration of diverse data sources, methodologies, and perspectives to enhance the depth and reliability of the study's findings. Concretely, I intertwined the subjective richness of personal narratives drawn from autoethnography with external insights gained through the analytical examination of my relevant reflections. This triangulated analytical process functioned to cross-validate and fortify observations collected, fostering comprehension of the complex interplay between education, veganism, and potential cultic influences. The distinctive triangulated approach that encompassed personal experiences ensured a comprehensive and nuanced exploration, thereby heightening the credibility and validity of the study's ultimate conclusions.

Within the framework of a study delving into the intricate connections among the educational system, the vegan movement in schools, and potential cultic influences, I adopted contextual analysis (Chang, 2008) as a nuanced approach to data examination. Contextual analysis entailed situating personal narratives from autoethnography within their broader sociocultural and historical context, offering an insightful lens to understand how external factors shaped individual experiences. By applying this method, I aimed to unravel the layers of influence stemming from societal, institutional, and cultural dynamics, enriching the interpretation of personal narratives. For instance, the contextual analysis illuminated the historical evolution of educational policies or societal shifts influencing attitudes toward veganism. By delving beyond the immediate personal experiences, this analytical method contributed depth and a holistic understanding to the study, acknowledging the multifaceted contextual forces that molded the complex interplay between education, veganism, and potential cultic influences.

Ethical Considerations

In navigating the realms of individualized autoethnography to unravel the intricate connections between the educational system, the vegan movement within schools, and their potential alignment with characteristics of a cultic movement, I placed ethical considerations at the forefront (Creswell, 2018). Given the personal nature of my experiences and the potential inclusion of identifiable information about people mentioned in any reflections, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity became a pivotal ethical consideration.

In the exploration of personal narratives that delved into sensitive aspects of individuals' lives within the educational system or the vegan movement, maintaining confidentiality and

anonymity was a priority. The presentation of data was meticulously handled, utilizing pseudonyms and omitting specific identifiers to shield the identities of individuals, institutions, or organizations involved. This ethical safeguard was imperative, preserving the privacy of participants and mitigating potential harm that could arise from the revelation of personal or sensitive information.

Considering the potential societal impact of the research, ethical considerations extended to the responsible dissemination of findings. I was devoted to presenting results in a manner that fostered understanding, promoted dialogue, and contributed positively to the fields of education and social movements. Efforts were made to steer clear of sensationalism, misrepresentation, or the stigmatization of any group, aligning with ethical principles that prioritized the responsible communication of research outcomes. In summary, this study was anchored in a robust ethical framework prioritizing reflexivity, sensitivity to power dynamics, and the responsible dissemination of findings. By steadfastly upholding these principles, the research aspired to contribute valuable insights to scholarly discourse.

Methodological Limitations

It was important to acknowledge the limitations of autoethnography, including potential biases and subjectivity. While the study aimed for specific insights, generalizability was limited. The findings were presented with transparency about my role and my perspective. Additionally, central to autoethnography was the acknowledgment of my positionality and its influence on the study. My background, beliefs, and experiences may have shaped my interpretation of events. Throughout the research process, I engaged in continuous reflexivity, critically examining my biases and assumptions to enhance the credibility and transparency of the study.

There were challenges in maintaining a balance between immersion in personal experiences and maintaining a critical distance for objective analysis. The reliance on personal narratives and reflections also limited the comprehensiveness of the study, as it may not have captured the full spectrum of experiences within diverse educational settings and vegan communities. Furthermore, the potential for self-censorship or selective recall could have impacted the completeness and accuracy of the data collected. It was essential to acknowledge these methodological limitations to ensure a transparent and responsible interpretation of the study's findings.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, the methodological framework outlined for this study, investigating the correlation between the educational system, the vegan movement in schools, and potential cultic influences, reflected a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to data collection and analysis. The use of autoethnography as a primary instrument provided a unique opportunity to delve into my personal experiences within these interconnected domains. The adoption of triangulation, combining personal narratives from autoethnography, enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings by capturing diverse perspectives and validating insights from multiple angles. Additionally, the incorporation of contextual analysis contributed depth by placing personal narratives within their broader sociocultural context, recognizing the influence of external factors on individual experiences.

It was through this carefully designed and integrated methodology that the study aimed to unravel the complexities underlying the relationships between education, veganism, and potential cultic influences, providing a rich and contextually grounded exploration of these interconnected

phenomena. As the research progressed, adherence to ethical considerations, reflexivity, and transparency remained paramount, ensuring the integrity of the study and the reliability of its findings.

Autoethnography offered a unique and valuable lens through which to explore the connections between the educational system, the vegan movement in schools, and each of their alignments with cultic tenets. The methodology aligned with the qualitative nature of the research questions, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within these intersecting domains.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from my autoethnographic study, detailing the process through which data were generated, organized, and analyzed. As described in the methodology section, autoethnography served as the primary method for data collection, enabling me to explore and reflect upon my personal experiences as a student, educator, and participant within the vegan movement. The questions guiding this inquiry were:

- What are common elements of and within schooling that can be identified as authoritarian and thus resembling documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups?

- What are common elements of and within the vegan movement that can be identified as resembling documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE model of cultic groups?

- How can I learn through this study to create greater space for critical "deprogramming" of normalized educational procedures within these areas of my work and life?

Before beginning the data collection process, my research method and proposed study were submitted for approval by Antioch University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval ensured that the study adhered to ethical standards, protecting both the integrity of the research and the privacy of any individuals mentioned or referenced within the findings. Given the reflective and personal nature of the study, which involved detailed autoethnographic journaling of my experiences in the educational system and the vegan movement, IRB approval was obtained to ensure that the research complied with ethical guidelines for confidentiality and the

respectful treatment of sensitive subjects. The IRB's approval marked an important step in the research process, providing confidence that my methodology adhered to the highest ethical standards.

Data generation for this study was rooted in my personal experiences, which were systematically recorded through a series of reflective autoethnographic journaling exercises. Over a period of six months, I regularly documented my thoughts, observations, and reflections on the practices and systems within the educational field and the vegan movement that seemed to echo elements of cultic behavior, as outlined in Steven Hassan's BITE model (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional control). These journals were kept digitally for ease of organization and access, and entries were dated and categorized to track recurring themes and emerging insights. To ensure consistency and clarity, I adhered to a simple system of categorizing entries based on the key themes related to the BITE model. For each entry, I would first identify the context—whether it was within the educational system or related to my experiences within the vegan movement—and then analyze how this context might align with the aspects of the BITE model. This process allowed me to identify patterns in behavior and thought processes, which I later synthesized into broader themes and relationships.

Additionally, the journal entries were cross-referenced with other data sources, such as literature on authoritarianism in education and the vegan movement, as well as documented instances of cult-like practices within both fields. These sources helped to ground my reflections in existing academic and societal discussions, ensuring that my personal experiences were contextualized within broader trends.

The data coding process involved a careful examination of each journal entry to identify significant patterns that could answer the research questions posed. I applied thematic analysis to group related journal entries into broader themes based on recurring concepts or behaviors that reflected elements of the BITE model. Each theme was then further broken down into categories based on the specific component of the BITE model it best reflected.

For example, within the educational system, I observed patterns of Behavior Control, where rigid structures and control over teacher-student interactions resembled authoritarian practices. I also noted instances where students' emotional responses, such as guilt and shame, were manipulated to enforce compliance with institutional norms, mirroring the Emotional Control aspects of the BITE model. Similarly, in the vegan movement, I observed behaviors such as a rigid adherence to particular dietary rules, where deviation was often met with social exclusion or guilt, reflecting both Thought and Emotional Control.

Lip-Syncing Patriotism

I used to walk into many crowded rooms as a child where the chaos of the mornings would subside in order to make way for the Pledge of Allegiance. I noticed quickly that the only time the school would stop what they were doing was to practically chant the string of words. I also came to the conclusion that the combination of every voice in the building sounded robotic and unnatural. From then on, I attempted to avoid exposing myself to that; it felt like it was being forced upon me—and it sure was.

I once blamed a non-existent cold on the fact that I was not going to say the Pledge with the rest of my classroom. I also would blame the bulging disc that pained my back due to a car accident that I was in. I also was so distraught when my grandma passed away in middle school

that I blamed my refusal on that. Each time I refused, my eighth-grade math teacher made it clear that it was unacceptable to make excuses; everyone must say the Pledge—no exceptions. I still challenged the rule but sometimes I would get so exhausted with being berated for my refusal to contribute to the saying of the Pledge that I would give up and say it, or, at least, I'd stand up and mouth the words like I was lip-syncing it.

This behavior continued throughout my high school years, but I did not feel like approaching any little amount of confrontation so I continued with my same lip-sync song and dance. I bit my tongue and got it over with each day so I could stay as invisible as possible in a crowd of over two thousand students.

Later, as a teacher, I told my students that it was their prerogative whether or not they wanted to recite the Pledge. I never once scolded a student when they did not want to say the Pledge, and I never stood up myself from my desk chair to recite it. However, I did give them the caveat that if they were asked by administration or if they encountered administration during the Pledge then they would pretend that they said it.

I was once walking a student to an IEP meeting in the hallway when the voice on the intercom announced that it was time for the Pledge. I did not stop walking with the student towards our destination, and therefore I did not stop to mix my voice into the whole of the human population that was saying it. We were almost to our meeting—nearly late—and a colleague who taught social studies nearly tripped over herself running to the doorframe of her classroom to shout at me that I needed to come to a complete halt in order to say the Pledge. I paused, but I was in shock that a colleague would get onto me like that—especially in front of a student. After she turned around and walked back into the classroom, I went on my way with the

student to the meeting. Later on, I tried to discuss this with my colleague but she was not receptive to me. She gave me a lecture on how it was our upmost form of patriotism to say the Pledge every day. She was later named Teacher of the Year that school year.

After that incident, I once again made it clear to my students who were present when it was that time of day that the Pledge was completely optional. If I was in another classroom when the Pledge occurred, then I would resort back to my traditional lip-syncing act. Word must have gotten back to my principal though, because it was later addressed at a staff meeting without naming any names.

Albeit inclusion of my name, I knew he was attempting to speak directly to me. I still continued to do exactly what I did prior to his lecture, and happily so. I felt a small sense of rebellion every morning when I continued to tell my students that the Pledge was completely optional and that they could choose to remain in their seats when they were saying it over the intercom.

To this day, I tell my elementary-aged daughter that she does not have to recite the Pledge of Allegiance if she does not want to. I reassure her that she will not get into trouble of any kind if she does not say the robotic chant and put her hand over her heart.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control

Characteristic(s)

Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals; Discourage individualism, encourage groupthink

Reflection and Analysis

The Pledge of Allegiance has been considered a staple at a majority of public schools across the United States, recited by students at the beginning of each school day. While it may appear to be just a simple routine, the Pledge goes deeper, symbolizing a broader sense of patriotism that has been deeply woven into American identity and public schooling. This sense of national allegiance was notably reignited after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The aftermath of the attacks created a climate in which individuals who did not participate in the Pledge were often viewed with suspicion, leading to the stereotype that those who refused to recite it might sympathize with terrorists. As Noguera and Cohen (2007) explain, "those who do not say the Pledge at the beginning of the school day have been theorized to sympathize with the terrorists who were said to have implemented the attacks" (p. 27). This deeply ingrained stereotype, passed down through generations, unfairly labels non-participants as unpatriotic, marking them as "other" in a post-9/11 society that equated patriotism with a literal and symbolic adherence to national rituals like the Pledge.

This association between patriotism and conformity in educational settings extends beyond the Pledge itself, with further legislative and institutional mechanisms reinforcing national loyalty. One such example is the No Child Left Behind Act, which imposed a provision requiring high schools to hand over students' personal information to military recruiters. Westheimer (2007) highlights this development, noting that "[a] provision that requires high schools to turn over students' personal information to military recruiters" (p. 9) further integrates patriotism into the very fabric of the educational system, pushing students toward military service as a patriotic duty. The act, ostensibly aimed at improving educational outcomes, inadvertently acts as a form

of social engineering, conditioning students to align their futures with the national interests of the military, thus perpetuating the cycle of unquestioned allegiance to the state.

Furthermore, the challenges to the Pledge's inclusion in schools have raised significant constitutional debates, particularly concerning the phrase "under God." The case of *Newdow v. United States Congress,* in which Michael Newdow challenged the inclusion of "under God" in the Pledge, offers a critical perspective on the intersection of religion and patriotism in public schools. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Newdow, asserting that the inclusion of these two words in the Pledge turned a patriotic exercise into "an unconstitutional affirmation of faith" (Driver, 2018, p. 421). While the court's decision did not require students to recite the Pledge, it underscored a fundamental issue: the intertwining of religious faith with civic duty in a way that could alienate students who do not share the same beliefs. This case exemplifies the tension between the patriotic aims of the Pledge and the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and separation of church and state, further complicating its place in the educational system.

In analyzing these challenges, it becomes clear that the Pledge of Allegiance serves not only as a simple expression of patriotism but as a symbol of conformity and a tool of ideological alignment. The unspoken expectation for students to recite it reinforces nationalistic ideals while suppressing individual autonomy and freedom of expression. The use of the Pledge in schools, particularly in a post-9/11 context, highlights how educational systems often act as vehicles for national identity, sometimes at the expense of personal belief and constitutional rights. The integration of such practices into the daily life of students suggests an ongoing tension between

promoting patriotic loyalty and respecting the diversity of beliefs and values within the student body. As such, the Pledge, despite its seemingly benign status as a daily ritual, functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of social control, shaping students' identities and reinforcing a specific vision of American patriotism that may not resonate with all individuals.

This expectation is a form of groupthink as described by the BITE Model, where individuals are encouraged to adhere to a collective identity and any dissent or deviation from the norm is discouraged. The Pledge, therefore, serves as a subtle but effective mechanism of behavior control within the educational system, steering students toward a shared, state-sanctioned vision of patriotism while discouraging alternative or critical viewpoints. In this sense, the Pledge is more than just a ritual; it is a tool of cultural and political indoctrination, enforcing conformity and discouraging individualism at a young age. The very structure of the educational system, with its focus on compliance and collective identity, aligns closely with the principles of behavior control found in the BITE Model, where individuals are shaped by the system to think, act, and believe in ways that reinforce the power and authority of the group.

Through the Pledge and similar institutional rituals, students are subtly indoctrinated into a specific worldview, one that prizes national loyalty and conformity over individual critical thinking and autonomy. As such, these practices, while ostensibly innocent or patriotic, function as powerful tools of socialization, shaping the behavior and beliefs of future generations to align with the ideals and expectations of the state, often at the expense of personal belief or dissent.

It Was Just a Tutu!

One moment that has imprinted itself into my time as a high school student was the one and only time that I was personally called to the principal's office for something associated with

negativity. That day, I had worn a black tutu but I had leggings on underneath the ensemble. The only purpose of the outfit was to express myself and stand out. I guess that I did that, so the mission was accomplished.

However, I heard the negative whispers of a peer making comments about my outfit to the business teacher as we entered the classroom. Not even a few minutes later, I received one of those infamous blue passes that indicated that I was needed in the principal's office. I was so nervous, because my high school had literally thousands of students in attendance with one main principal—there were three assistant principals who took care of most of the issues.

When I walked into her office, she looked me up and down. I imagine she thought that I was going to be dressed in something much, much worse. She sighed as if this visit was a waste of her time. All she said was, "pull your tutu down a little." I could sense that she wanted to roll her eyes at the person who requested that I go to her office as she signed my blue pass to go back to class. The student who I know reported me to the teacher was rolling her eyes for the opposite reason. She must have assumed that I would either return to class in the garments that they save from the lost and found for those who disobey the dress code or that I would be sent home for the day. She was not happy.

Many years later, a student of mine came to school dressed similar to what I had worn that day. She was also wearing leggings and was not revealing anything that might be considered harmful or distracting to others. My principal—who had a knack for spotting when girls did not meet her dress code standards—almost instantly flew into a rage in front of my class, deeming the student as inappropriate for class. The student said that she was perfectly fine, as none of her skin was exposed to anyone. I agreed with the student, and stood firm in my agreement. My

principal proceeded to tell her in front of the whole class that she was going to be suspended for her outfit. Later, I told my principal that the student's outfit was fine and that she was out of line for telling the student that she would be suspended in front of the entire class. She then told me that she said no such thing and that the student was not going to be suspended. However, she monitored the student's outfit for the rest of the school year like a hawk.

The attire of the male students was something entirely different. The boys were coming to school wearing their shorts low, with the backs sagging and the outline of their bottoms visible from both sides. The girls were not allowed to wear shorts of any kind. The girls would receive discipline if their capri pants were too short. The boys were also getting away with wearing tight-fitting pajama pants that outlined their crotch areas. The girls were not allowed to wear any type of clothes associated with pajamas or nightwear. They were not allowed to wear bonnets, while the boys walked around in their du-rags constantly without worry of punishment.

A female student came to school with pajama pants on and my principal blew into a tirade. She demanded that the student change into one of the spare clothing items that the school had, and the student declined even after being threatened with in-school suspension. I told my principal that she was over-reacting and that she should be happy that students are even attending school. The student expressed to me that she was gaining weight and had no pants that fit her. My principal was true to her promise and kept that student in in-school suspension for the rest of the day.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control

Characteristic(s)

Control of different types of clothing and hairstyles; Discourage individualism, encourage groupthink; Permission required for major decisions; Rewards and punishments used to modify behaviors, both positive and negative; Instill dependency and obedience

Reflection and Analysis

The school system's control over student clothing and hairstyles reveals a deeply entrenched mechanism of behavioral control that reflects and perpetuates societal biases. While each public school has its own dress code, these codes are often ambiguous, leaving enforcement to the discretion of administrators and staff. This ambiguity allows personal biases and prejudices to shape the interpretation of these policies, which disproportionately impact certain groups of students (Banks, 2021; Glickman, 2016; Harbach, 2016). For instance, many dress codes disproportionately target girls by framing their clothing choices as inherently sexual, perpetuating societal stereotypes that blame women for unwanted attention. Harbach (2016) observes that "school administrators should understand that they develop and implement school dress code policy within a broader cultural setting that too frequently sexualizes females and blames them for unwanted sexual attention and harassment" (p. 1058). This implicit bias not only subjects girls to stricter scrutiny but also normalizes the policing of their bodies as part of the educational environment.

Moreover, dress codes often include implicit rules that disproportionately target students of color, particularly Black students. Natural hairstyles, such as afros, braids, and locs, are frequently labeled as "distracting," reflecting a broader societal bias against Black cultural expressions. Such discriminatory practices reinforce Eurocentric beauty standards and stigmatize

Black identity, pushing these students to conform to a restrictive norm that denies their individuality.

Similarly, students who wear religious garments, such as hijabs, often face challenges despite legal protections. Taylor et al. (2014) highlight the case of *Hearn v. United States and Muskogee Public School District* (2004), in which a sixth-grade student, Nashala Hearn, was banned from wearing her hijab due to the school's interpretation of a "no hats" policy. The court ultimately ruled that her rights to free speech and religious exercise had been violated, underscoring the disconnect between dress codes and an inclusive understanding of religious practices.

Gender-nonconforming students, including those who identify as transgender or non-binary, also face significant challenges under traditional dress codes. Most of these codes enforce rigid, binary gender norms, with stereotypical clothing requirements that align with societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. Reddy-Best and Choi (2019) found that "most dress codes that separated by gender included some type of reference to clothing or accessories, and these were always stereotypical, gender-conforming options." These restrictions not only marginalize students whose gender identity does not align with these norms but also force them to choose between self-expression and compliance with school rules.

Ultimately, school dress codes serve as a form of behavioral control that discourages individualism and enforces groupthink, often to the detriment of students' autonomy, identity, and rights. By embedding societal biases into the educational environment, these policies perpetuate systemic inequities, positioning schools as microcosms of larger cultural dynamics that privilege conformity over inclusivity.

Is Ketchup a Vegetable?

It seemed as if the cafeteria food fell upon a strict schedule: breaded chicken nuggets, followed by square-shaped pepperoni pizza, followed by breaded chicken tenders, followed by greasy triangular pepperoni pizza, and repeat. Of course, the menu did not consist of chicken nuggets and pizza exclusively. There was always the side of slimy French fries, tater tots, or these little patronizing potatoes in the shape of smiley faces (with holes for the eyes and smile) to complement any meal.

As I approached high school, a new addition was added to the menu—the salad. The salad was iceberg lettuce mix with carrot slivers, circular red tomatoes, with the smallest hint of radish. There was only one salad dressing option: off-brand ranch dressing in a small cup that barely covered the salad. It came in a plastic container with dirty looks from the cafeteria staff, as if they despised putting these salads together on a daily basis.

The high school also had the addition of pepperoni pizza from a local establishment instead of the triangular shaped pizza of the past. The pizza was so greasy that it felt like I spent the majority of my limited lunch time blotting the pizza with a brown napkin. To combat these menus, I started bringing my own lunches to school. I do not remember exactly what I used to bring, but it was much more nutritious than the cafeteria food that was offered to the student population. Occasionally, I would indulge in a cafeteria meal that was not a salad.

As a public school teacher, the menu did not seem to be as differentiated as much as administration promoted differentiation in the lessons of the classroom. The food still remained as similar as it was when I was still a student. I never attempted to try the school lunch. When I

was teaching at the private behavioral school setting, I was known as that teacher who loved herself a warm, crispy hash brown (or two, or five) in the mornings.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control

Characteristic(s)

Regulation of diet; Discourage individualism

Reflection and Analysis

The regulation of student diets in public schools has its roots in federal oversight and funding mechanisms, shaping both what is served and how it is distributed. School meals are largely determined by government programs, such as those administered by the USDA, which provide federal reimbursements to local School Food Authorities on a per-meal basis (Hirschman & Chriqui, 2013, p. 982). This arrangement limits the autonomy of cafeteria workers, who are required to prepare meals based on pre-determined menus and pre-purchased ingredients. While these meals are designed to meet nutritional standards, the lack of variety and emphasis on milk —skim, strawberry, or chocolate—reflects a rigid system that often ignores individual student needs and preferences. Water, a fundamental necessity, is frequently not an accessible alternative, with students relying on water fountains that are often limited by adult permission or bottle-carrying policies that come with restrictions.

This highly regulated approach is rooted in the historical context of the National School Lunch Act of 1946, signed by President Truman in response to widespread malnutrition among young Americans during the Great Depression. Truman recognized school meals as a matter of "national security," addressing the alarming number of military draftees rejected for

malnourishment (Driver, 2018, p. 35). However, the legacy of this program has evolved into a system that prioritizes standardization over flexibility. By framing school lunches as a federal responsibility tied to national well-being, the program also imposes control over students' daily lives, dictating not only their diets but also their ability to access basic resources like water. This reflects an underlying behavioral control mechanism, discouraging individual dietary autonomy and reinforcing group norms through a standardized meal program. While the program aims to ensure no child goes hungry, it inadvertently limits agency, perpetuating a one-size-fits-all model that overlooks cultural, personal, and health-based needs.

The evolution of school lunches from homestyle meals to fast-food-style menus in the 1970s and 1980s exacerbated these issues. During this time, federal school meal funding saw severe cuts, prompting districts to rely on processed food manufacturers and even fast-food chains, which promised cost-effective solutions. This shift gave rise to programs like Domino's Smart Slice pizza, allowing districts to serve hot meals delivered by local franchisees (Siegel, 2019, p. 93). Though these changes were intended to reduce food waste and save money, they also contributed to the growing dominance of pre-packaged and processed foods in cafeterias. Students were granted more choice with the "three out of five components" policy, but the underlying focus remained on cutting costs rather than promoting holistic nutritional health (Siegel, 2019, p. 92).

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010, championed by former First Lady Michelle Obama, attempted to address some of these issues by introducing stricter limits on calories, fat, and sodium in school meals (Bardin et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain, such as the lack of restrictions on added sugar, which continues to undermine the

health benefits of the program (Siegel, 2019, p. 94). Moreover, the use of a "nutrient standard" method to design menus often results in paradoxical offerings, like cookies at breakfast, which technically meet nutritional requirements but fail to address broader dietary concerns (Siegel, 2019, p. 5).

For students who cannot afford to purchase meals but do not qualify for free or reduced lunch programs, the system can be particularly harsh. Many schools require students to load their accounts with funds to purchase meals, and those without a positive balance are often given a minimal, stigmatizing alternative like a cheese sandwich or sunflower seed butter sandwich. This practice highlights the rigid and punitive nature of the current system, which prioritizes bureaucratic efficiency over the dignity and well-being of students. Maslow (1943)—-in his Hierarchy of Needs Model—points out that food trumps dignity and that need of sufficient nutrition is a basic need for all students.

In this highly regulated and standardized environment, school meals reflect broader societal tensions around food and nutrition. As Siegel (2019) notes, "[school districts are] using a 'nutrient standard' method to create its menus, which [allow] districts to check off various nutrient boxes (like iron) without necessarily having to justify the bigger picture" (p. 5). This piecemeal approach mirrors the food tribalism that characterizes contemporary dietary discourse, where competing ideologies—veganism, low-carb, paleo, and others—often generate friction rather than consensus (Bardin et al., 2020; Siegel, 2019).

Ultimately, while the National School Lunch Program and related initiatives aim to combat hunger and promote health, they are mired in contradictions. From the emphasis on processed foods to the lack of cultural and individual dietary considerations, the current system perpetuates

a cycle of limited choice and diminished agency. By prioritizing standardization over adaptability, the program continues to serve a narrow vision of nutrition, one that often fails to meet the diverse needs of today's students.

Principal, AKA Gaslighter

I did not notice that my paraprofessional was missing a majority of her fingers on one of her hands until the sixth month of working with her. However, that did not excuse the cruel behaviors that she would exhibit towards the students in our special education classroom.

One incident occurred when there were four adults present in our small classroom. Class was dismissing, but my para was upset about something that was happening. I was discussing something with a colleague, and out of nowhere my para started yelling "You know what?! I hate coming to work every day because of you *student name*!"

Albeit all three of us reported directly to the principal's office right after the incident, but it was dismissed as fast as it happened. My principal promised that it would be addressed, but the student was expressing that they did not want to go back to the class because of the actions of the para. I called a meeting with my principal. He said that it was my responsibility to teach my para how to talk to the students. I said to my principal that I should not have to teach her that her behavior was unacceptable. He said, "sometimes you have to teach people some common sense." As far as I know, her behaviors were never addressed and she did not receive any consequences or remediation for her behavior. She stayed in my classroom until another incident happened, in which I became the villain in that story.

The second incident happened when I left my students with my para because I had to go to the restroom. The bathroom was right next to my classroom, so I did not anticipate anything

major would happen while I was gone for what was only going to be a few minutes. When I

returned, I peeked through the small window on my classroom door to see that my para was

dragging a student by a notebook in slow motion across the table. I saw another colleague in the

hallway, so I called her over to see what I saw in order to back up my story. Once she saw the

incident with her own eyes, I walked in the classroom and addressed the behavior immediately.

Again, having others vouch for what I saw was not acceptable. My principal told me that I was

out of the classroom for too long and I should have stopped the para's behavior quicker. My

principal started watching my movements on the camera and calculating how long I would spend

outside of the classroom when I used the bathroom. He later would come to me to report that I

spent eight minutes in the bathroom, albeit the incident occurred when I was on my planning

period time.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Information Control; Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Distort information to make it more acceptable; Impose a buddy system to monitor and

control member; Information about sins used to disrupt and/or dissolve identity boundaries;

Withholding forgiveness or absolution; Manipulation of memory, possible false memories; Make

the person feel that problems are always their own fault, never the leader's or the group's fault;

Promoting feelings of unworthiness

Reflection and Analysis

Teacher turnover has emerged as a critical issue in education, with a growing body of

evidence pointing to the pivotal role of principal abuse and harassment in prompting teachers to

leave their positions. The impact of such behavior on educators extends beyond personal and professional well-being; it directly affects the stability of school environments, student outcomes, and the integrity of educational systems.

At the heart of this phenomenon is the behavior of abusive principals who, rather than supporting their teaching staff, engage in patterns of mistreatment that undermine morale and professional efficacy. Blase and Blase (2003) captured this dynamic vividly, noting, "In all cases of nonsupport with students, teachers reported that abusive principals were 'shamelessly unfair'; they failed to properly investigate problems, often blamed teachers for the problems, and verbally mistreated teachers in front of students." This type of behavior creates an environment in which teachers feel devalued and unsupported, perpetuating a sense of injustice and professional vulnerability. Public mistreatment further erodes the teacher's authority and ability to manage their classroom effectively, as students witness their educators being disrespected.

The detrimental effects of principal harassment are not confined to isolated anecdotes. Khumalo (2019) emphasized the broader implications of such behavior, stating, "Harassment of the teacher implies that school leadership continuously insult or show disrespectful behavior toward his or her subordinates" (p. 549). This persistent disrespect manifests in various forms, including verbal abuse, dismissive attitudes, and undermining professional autonomy. When compounded over time, these actions cultivate an environment of psychological and emotional distress, prompting many educators to reconsider their commitment to the profession. Teachers facing such environments are often left to navigate feelings of humiliation, worthlessness, and anxiety, all of which significantly impact their ability to perform their duties.

Scallon et al. (2023) added another dimension to this conversation by highlighting the critical role of teachers' perceptions of principal leadership in their decision to remain in their roles. According to their findings, "[Across] grade level, contexts, and student demographics, teachers' perceptions of principal leadership have had the greatest influence on teachers' decisions" (p. 81). This underscores the far-reaching consequences of abusive leadership; principals who fail to foster positive relationships with their staff directly contribute to higher rates of attrition. When teachers perceive their leaders as hostile, dismissive, or indifferent, they are more likely to leave, seeking environments where their contributions are valued and their professional dignity upheld.

The impact of principal abuse extends beyond the individual teacher. It fosters a culture of fear and compliance that aligns with the BITE model because principal harassment specifically aligns with the information and emotional control aspects of this model. By belittling teachers in front of students and staff, abusive principals exert emotional control, manipulating the morale and self-perception of educators. Teachers are often made to feel powerless and dependent on the principal's approval for their professional standing, regardless of their competence or dedication.

In terms of information control, principals who engage in harassment frequently distort or suppress information to serve their narrative. For instance, Blase and Blase's (2003) observation that principals often fail to properly investigate problems or blame teachers unjustly illustrates a deliberate manipulation of truth. Such actions create a one-sided narrative that isolates teachers and prevents them from defending their professional integrity. This dynamic forces teachers into silence and compliance, aligning their behavior with the principal's demands to avoid further

mistreatment. Over time, this control erodes the teacher's autonomy and reinforces a hierarchical power structure that stifles collaboration and innovation.

The emotional toll of working under such conditions cannot be overstated. Teachers subjected to harassment experience chronic stress, burnout, and a diminished sense of professional fulfillment. These emotional repercussions not only affect their decision to leave but also their ability to form meaningful connections with students and colleagues during their tenure. Consequently, the abusive actions of principals ripple through the entire school community, compromising the learning environment and undermining educational outcomes.

The relationship between principal abuse and teacher turnover illustrates a systemic issue within the education sector. The role of leadership is critical in shaping the school's culture, yet when this leadership turns oppressive, the entire institution suffers. Teachers, who are the backbone of the educational system, bear the brunt of this dysfunction, often at the cost of their careers and well-being. In addressing teacher turnover, it is essential to acknowledge the profound impact of principal behavior and its alignment with mechanisms of control, as evidenced by the BITE model and the lived experiences of educators across contexts.

Only Agenda Is My Lesson Plan

I was close to my co-teacher at the time as the previous entry. We would text and talk outside of school hours. I went to her wedding. We spent our plan periods together not planning.

One day, I was telling her and another colleague a story about how a student asked me if I was bisexual when I was using proximity control during a lesson. The other colleague—whom I told ages prior that I was into women but maybe was not fully listening—said, "So, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Bisexual."

Without thinking, I said yes. I was dating a man at the time, but have always leaned towards women. I did not think it was a big deal. I was out; it was not a big secret to me. If anyone would have accessed my Facebook profile, they would have seen my preferences listed clear as day. I was "friends" on Facebook with both of these colleagues. I was not hiding.

My co-teacher's face changed at the speed of light to shock. She quickly collected her things and sped out of the classroom. I texted her shortly after and she stated via text that she was okay with it; after all, her brother was gay and she stated that he had passed from AIDS. It was fine. Nothing to worry about at all.

The next day, it was not fine. When our class started, our students sat in our classroom and she asked to speak to me out in the hallway; she did not close the door behind her. The students were invested in our conversation, as the classroom of our thirty students became flies on the wall.

"We cannot be friends any longer," she said.

She gave me no official explanation, but I immediately understood her rationale. After she was done speaking, I ran back to my empty classroom and cried. That eventually escalated into a panic attack, in which another co-worker encouraged me to go to the school nurse to seek assistance. The school nurse's office was directly located next the principal's office. I could not breathe well when I went to her office, and she immediately stepped away and alerted my principal even when she said she would not do so.

The principal had already been alerted to the situation between my co-teacher and myself, so he read between the lines with a disrespectful attitude. I told him that I needed to go home and even though I made up some excuse, he knew exactly what was going on.

I returned to work next day thinking that the previous day was a fluke. I was quickly reminded that I was terribly wrong when I checked my e-mail to discover she had written a long e-mail that summarized our previous conversation. She began to treat me as if I was a student that was acting as if I was some kind of teacher.

She had given an assignment to our seventh graders that aimed for teams of students to research a famous person and report back on their findings through a specific rubric that she had created. I was given a group to work with, and they asked me for an example. Anyone that knows me knows that I am a major fan of Cher, so I said Cher—of course.

One of my students blurted out, "Cher?! Is she gay?!"

I shook my head no and my co-teacher came over to the group as if we had screamed her name. "I'm going to report you," she said as she pointed at me and walked out of the classroom.

This prompted a meeting with the administration where I was interrogated about what students had come out to me as members of the LGBTQ+ community. They wanted names so that they could out them to their parents. I stood firm and refused to give them any information. In fact, students had come out to me—not because I told them of my affiliation, but because we developed positive student/teacher relationships.

One day, I got the courage to tell my co-teacher before class started that my sexual orientation was not a huge secret and was publicly declared on my Facebook page; we were

Facebook friends prior to this. "I did not peruse your Facebook page," she said. We never discussed anything like that again. I had to accept that our friendship was over.

Eventually, we had to separate our class in half. I would take my group to my classroom, and she would keep the rest of the students in her classroom. She refused to be civil with me, and would proceed to give me dirty looks. This separation continued for a few months.

Our principal told us that we had to go back to co-teaching together because we had students who were on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). We were watched by administration whenever we taught together. We had to be monitored in the school library by the librarian whenever we needed to have planning periods together. The librarian would immediately run off to the principal in order to tell him what facial expressions my face made and what "unprofessional" behavior that I was demonstrating in the meeting.

One day, I was standing by the light switch when she asked a student to flip the switch for her—as if I was invisible. I said, "I am standing by the light switch. I got it." I flipped the switch, ready to continue with her lesson. However, she stopped in her tracks and said, "Get out!"

"I am not a student. You can't just kick me out," I said.

"GET OUT!"

Somehow, this caused me to disassociate and I went to the in-school suspension room. I sat myself in one of the seats and started to tell the story to the in-school suspension teacher in front of the students that were present in there. Minutes that felt like seconds passed, and the vice-principal came to escort me away. Somehow, I had managed to open up my school laptop and sent a message to my mom's co-worker on Facebook.

I sat in the principal's office surrounded by the principal and the vice-principal as if I was at a police station being interrogated. I hyperventilated, unable to breathe or speak. Both of the administrators were yelling at me and repeating themselves, but I do not remember what they were saying. Before I knew it, the door opened and my mother was standing there. She had a feeling that something was going on because I was not responding to her messages.

Albeit embarrassment occurred from having my mother show up at my place of employment, I was glad she showed up. She handled the proper paperwork that the administration was trying to give me; I am still unclear on everything. They would not let me grab my things from my classroom though, they forced me to obtain my personal items myself. I am assuming this was for school security.

The accumulation of all of the trauma from all of the overlapping situations caused me to snap. I took FMLA due to documented anxiety as well as the constant harassment of the administration from these events. I did not return to the school until after summer vacation started to finish retrieving my things from my classroom. By then, my co-teacher was happily retired.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control; Thought Control; Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Regulates individual's physical reality; Rewards and punishments used to modify behavior; Impose rigid rules and regulations; Instill black and white thinking; Decide against/ between good and evil; Organize people into us vs. them; Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness (identity guilt).

Reflection and Analysis

Teachers occupy a unique and often precarious position within the educational system, subject to intense scrutiny from multiple directions: students, administration, and parents. Their every action, decision, and even personal expression is evaluated through a lens shaped by societal expectations and preconceived notions of what a "proper" educator should embody. These judgments often favor conformity and traditionalism, aligning with the desire to maintain a sense of stability and control within the school community. This creates an environment where any deviation from the norm is not only noticed but frequently criticized.

Bader in Westheimer (2007) explains that such scrutiny is deeply rooted in the human tendency to create an "us versus them" dichotomy, stating, "By creating an imaginary 'us' and 'them,''they can then promise satisfaction of deep and legitimate longings for a community safe from both real and illusory threats posed from the outside" (p. 43). This mentality fosters a culture where anyone perceived as an outsider becomes a potential threat to the community's cohesion. Within the school system, this dynamic can manifest in the way teachers who deviate from traditional norms—whether through their teaching styles, beliefs, or personal expression— are viewed as anomalies. These individuals are often seen as challenges to the established order, rather than as contributors to a richer, more diverse educational environment.

In my experience within one particular school district, I failed to fit the mold of the "normal" teacher. My quirks—like my habit of dying my hair vibrant colors from across the rainbow—made me stand out in an environment that seemed to value conformity over individuality. This expression of self, while harmless, was met with raised eyebrows and often became a point of contention. For some, my colorful hair symbolized a lack of professionalism

or seriousness, feeding into the narrative that I was an outsider rather than part of the cohesive

"us." Despite being fully dedicated to my students and my craft, I was judged for failing to meet

superficial expectations, overshadowing my contributions as an educator.

This dynamic is further complicated by the systemic structures within education that limit

teachers' autonomy and personal expression. Lupu and Tuttle (2022) emphasize the dual role of

teachers as both public employees and private citizens, stating, "School employees, on school

premises and within school hours, are agents of the state. The school directs the performance of

their duties. Students rightly perceive the communication of teachers as reflecting the values and

concerns of the school. Unless the teacher's expression is unmistakably separate from official

duties, students will assume that such expression is attributable to the school" (p. 1802). This

blurred line often subjects teachers to heightened scrutiny, where their personal beliefs and

identities are scrutinized as if they were an extension of the school's values.

The pressures placed on teachers to conform to narrow definitions of acceptability can

stifle creativity and authenticity, both of which are critical to fostering meaningful connections

with students. This dynamic illustrates a larger issue within the educational system, where

conformity is often prioritized over embracing diversity and individuality. Teachers, like their

students, benefit from environments where they can express themselves freely without fear of

judgment, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and enriching learning experience.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case, especially for LGBTQ+ educators. Castillo

(2023) notes, "School settings have stratified power dynamics that put at a disadvantage anyone

who falls outside what is considered 'normal'" (p. 589). These stratified power dynamics often

lead to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ teachers, who may feel pressured to hide aspects of their identity to align with the "norm" or avoid backlash (Moore, 2023; National Education Association, 2023; National School Board Association, 2021). Castillo further explains that "[2020] Supreme Court cases offer some reprieve from employment discrimination, there remains a stigma against queer teachers in public education, long rooted in the oppression and morality clauses that prevent gainful employment in schools" (p. 589).

A recent study by The Williams Institute called LGBTQ People's Experiences of Workplace Discrimination and Harassment (2024) found that "Almost half (47%) of LGBTQ employees reported experiencing discrimination or harassment at work (including being fired, not hired, not promoted, or being verbally, physically, or sexually harassed) because of their sexual orientation or gender identity during their lifetime" (p. 2). This aligns with Payne and Smith's (2017) observation that "the political climate of their school districts or communities made it difficult or impossible for LGBTQ topics to be included in professional development programming; [leaders] must seek permission or community consensus before action can be taken" (p. 203). This highlights a systemic reluctance to address diversity in meaningful ways, perpetuating environments that isolate and disadvantage those who do not conform.

The weight of community expectations, as discussed by Kahn and Gorski (2016), highlights the challenges teachers face. As public employees working closely with minors, teachers' rights as private citizens are often limited, while the expectations to adhere to community norms are amplified. Failure to meet these expectations can result in consequences (Kahn & Gorski, 2016, p. 21).

This duality—of being both citizen and public employee—encapsulates the tension many educators face. The rigid control exerted over teachers' behaviors, thoughts, and emotions reflects the characteristics of the BITE model. These constraints not only shape their professional experiences but also influence their sense of identity and belonging within the educational system. Addressing these challenges requires systemic change to prioritize inclusivity, authenticity, and diversity, ensuring that teachers can thrive both as individuals and as professionals.

Black Lipstick for Mourning

I spent two years in a public school as a teacher where the majority of teachers were devoted Trump supporters. One teacher even proudly displayed a Confederate flag in his classroom, attributing its location to the fact that he was a social studies teacher who was teaching about the Civil War. I observed his class multiple times and never once did he teach about any topic related to the Civil War. My co-worker would report him to the main headquarters of the school district, and he would be forced to take it down. Once he felt as if the smoke cleared, he would put it back exactly where it was. Then, my co-worker would call again. I think this process initiated at least four times that school year. That teacher was labeled as Teacher of the Year at the end of the school year. He then went on to become a curriculum specialist for the entire school district, and is currently a principal at a middle school.

When Trump won the election the first time, I literally went into mourning with my all-black lipstick on my lips as I navigated the world in sadness. This may sound dramatic, but I knew that my rights were on the line with his impending presidency, and he has since divided the country.

I watched the January 6th insurrection play out on live television as I was teaching virtually from home. I was so much in shock about what was occurring, that I had to stop my lesson completely and stare at the insurrection that was happening in real time. It still baffles my mind that some people did and do not consider it to be a coup. It also baffles my mind that people still were rushing to the polls to vote for this man after so much wrongdoing.

My father and my brother are avid Trump supporters, but my father and brother are also White men who evidently value their tax bracket more than anything else. I have never understood how people could ignore that a crooked businessman that has prominently displayed his lack of understanding of how real people live could be the best for helping those in the middle, working class. My father thinks that wearing his red MAGA hat is the ultimate status symbol, even though that hat has now become a symbol of hatred. It's heartbreaking to know that so many support this monster—especially people like my father and brother who have a person like me in their lives that has their livelihood as well as their lesbian, interracial marriage threatened on a consistent basis. Either way, I thought the United States threw Donald Trump out of the government when he was not re-elected in 2020.

November 6, 2024 was supposed to be a day of celebration in which we finally were to elect our first bi-racial, woman president Kamala Harris. For some reason, Trump still won the election becoming the second president since Grover Cleveland to win two non-consecutive terms. However, Donald Trump has become the first president who has thirty-four convicted felonies; who is liable for sexual abuse in court; who was impeached twice; and who incited an insurrection at the United States Capitol. He has quite literally threatened democracy with his own actions and speeches, all the while not facing any consequences or lack of voters.

So, I am continuing to wear my black lipstick for mourning.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Thought Control

Characteristic(s)

Require members to internalize the group's doctrine as truth; Adopting the group's "map of reality" as reality; Organize people into us vs. them (insiders vs. outsiders)

Reflection and Analysis

The mentality of Trumpism has extended its influence far beyond the political sphere, reaching into the very fabric of the American education system. This infiltration has contributed to a climate of fear, division, and control, shaping the discourse and behaviors within schools across the country. This phenomenon is not just a reflection of political ideologies entering classrooms but a manifestation of deeper mechanisms of behavioral control and the erosion of critical thought.

The political movement associated with Trumpism has heightened tensions in educational spaces, particularly in how history, identity, and equity are addressed. Giroux (2021) critiques the growing erasure of critical historical reflection, noting that "public consciousness of the space needed for critical reflection withers along with a rendering of the past as a source of critical insight." The shift toward a narrative of exceptionalism—a core tenet of Trumpism—leaves little room for acknowledging historical injustices or their ongoing implications. This mentality transforms the historical record into a battleground where critical inquiry and the pursuit of equity are seen as threats to national identity.

This mindset directly contributes to what Tharoor (2020) identifies as a calculated grievance against "left-wing indoctrination" in education. Trump's rhetoric positioned the acknowledgment of systemic racism and the legacy of slavery as unpatriotic, linking these issues to broader unrest and dissatisfaction. This framing has fueled backlash against curricula that promote critical thinking about America's past, including frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), which have become lightning rods for controversy (Pfeifer, 2022). Consequently, educational spaces are increasingly monitored and restricted, stifling opportunities for meaningful engagement with complex social issues.

The rise of Trumpism in schools can also be observed in its impact on student behavior and school climates. Barshay (2018) found that bullying and teasing rates diverged significantly along political lines following the 2016 election, signaling how political rhetoric influenced interpersonal dynamics among students. The Southern Poverty Law Center's 2017 survey further highlights the real and immediate fears experienced by marginalized students, particularly immigrants, Muslims, and children of immigrants, many of whom expressed concern for their safety and future. Teachers reported a marked increase in uncivil discourse and anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim sentiment, reflecting how Trump's rhetoric emboldened behaviors rooted in prejudice.

Such behavioral shifts are not merely incidental; they are indicative of a larger mechanism of behavior control within schools. By normalizing exclusionary ideologies and reducing complex historical and social issues to simplistic, polarizing narratives, Trumpism creates an environment where dissenting voices are silenced (Harris, 2022). Students internalize these

dynamics, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and fear while discouraging solidarity and inclusivity.

Humbled by Hidden History

My mom—an avid reader of true crime—did not learn about what happened in the Tulsa massacre until a few months ago. Like many, she studied in a public high school during the seventies and was not challenging the curriculum. After all, there were no sources to instantly debunk any of the material that was being taught. Even if there was, it is very doubtful that students would engage in that type of behavior. I thought back to my time in school and realized that I learned about the events in Tulsa on my own outside of the classroom environment. I then realized that I had not learned about a lot of events that happened in history. In turn, I learned that these events are purposefully omitted from the school curriculum in order to ensure that white people did not feel a sense of guilt for the actions of their ancestors—or so they claim.

Many critical events have not been presented in their legitimate form in the school curriculum; I do not remember learning about the 'real' history inside of a classroom. I learned about the true presence of the Black community in every facet of our world history after I graduated high school, and did not learn a majority of the information that I know now until approximately my time spent in graduate school for my Masters degree.

Instead of these events, I learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. every year in January and February. The teachers that I had showcased Black History Month with a few common names such as Harriet Tubman. They always made us listen to the famous "I Have a Dream" speech year after year, but no words were ever spoken about it again after that day. They explained the

words of the speech—and how we should follow King's dream—but their actions showed that they only followed those words for the entirety of his speech and not a second after.

There was more than just the "I Have a Dream" speech included in high school, but not a lot. In AP English, we did read "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, Jr. and perhaps a Langston Hughes poem, but the curriculum seemed to have mandated more extensive discussion of pieces like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" and *The Grapes of Wrath.* Black History was offered as an elective in high school, but was an elective that was only opened to a select few.

When I was given the chance to have free reign to formulate my own history and English curriculum when I taught at the private day treatment facility, I gravitated towards exclusively teaching Black history—and not only during a specific month. I decided this after I started teaching middle school students from a suggested textbook and they said that the information was redundant because they had heard it all too many times. I thought back to my Masters degree in Multicultural Education and knew what to do.

I taught all ages, grade levels, subjects, and skillset abilities at that time. We made crafts to represent the inventions of famous Black people such as the traffic light, the mailbox, and the potato chip. I created a banner that I decorated the dry erase board with that proclaimed the names of Black women of history, then we read about one of them each day. We listened to music created by Black people that was mostly taken and rebranded as music created by white people. We would read literature and poetry by Langston Hughes, Trevor Noah, Jason Reynolds, and so many more.

They read a story about Claudette Colvin, which is not a name most people recognize due to her being overshadowed by Rosa Parks. We read about Ruby Bridges being escorted by the military to her first day of school, and that happened more recently than they ever realized. I also taught them about empathy and how to analyze the world. This opened up a new world of conversations and a-ha moments for so many students. I included Black history and Black present in every day, that was a non-negotiable for me as a teacher at that school. No other school has given me the opportunity to create the curriculum for my students like that school did, and I will forever be grateful for that.

I am not writing this to ask for praise or compliments. I don't deserve any trophies for teaching the true history or including Black history in my daily lessons. I just know the high importance of including Black history and Black present into my classroom, because that opportunity has now been stripped away.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Information Control

Characteristic(s)

Deception by deliberately withholding information; Deception by distorting information to make it more acceptable; Extensive use of cult-generated information and propaganda, including misquoting statements or using them out of context from non-cult sources

Reflection and Analysis

Scripted curriculum has increasingly become intertwined with the hidden curriculum, often concealing the true and nuanced history of marginalized communities through the whitewashing of historical narratives (Lewis & Diamond, 2025). Milner (2013) highlights the

restrictive nature of scripted curriculum, noting that "teachers' professional expertise and judgment may be overshadowed by curriculum manuals and materials intended to provide them with a scripted roadmap presumably leading to an increase in student test scores. Teachers are to act as robots rather than professionals when the scripts and the expectations of the teacher and consequently students are shaped by someone else" (p. 1). This robotic implementation removes educators' ability to tailor instruction to meet the unique needs of their students or to include diverse perspectives not present in the official curriculum. The system dictates what is taught and how it is taught, limiting the teacher's role to that of a mere implementer, rather than a critical thinker capable of expanding students' understanding through their own professional knowledge and contextual insight. This form of control over the educational process is not merely a pedagogical choice but a mechanism for ensuring conformity to a standardized narrative that often ignores histories of oppression, resistance, and resilience.

Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) further critique the scripted curriculum, describing it as "the ultimate form of standardization," claiming that it "ostensibly neutralizes these resource deficits by guaranteeing students an all-inclusive, high-quality curriculum that directly aligns with state standards and is, in theory, 'teacher-proof'—meaning that it can be delivered by any teacher regardless of subject knowledge or prior experience" (p. 201). However, this so-called "teacher-proof" model disregards the need for culturally relevant and inclusive education, instead perpetuating a sanitized version of history that aligns with dominant, often Eurocentric narratives. By eliminating the space for educators to adjust curriculum content to better reflect their students' lived experiences, this scripted curriculum upholds a system of information

control that stifles critical thought. It ensures that the history taught in schools serves the interests of those in power by minimizing or even erasing alternative perspectives that challenge the status quo.

The widespread adoption of scripted curricula exacerbates the erasure of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) voices and experiences. Rigell et al. (2022) emphasize that "[scripted curricula continues] to be adopted in US schools, despite their lack of comprehensive BIPOC representation" (p. 583). This hinders the opportunity to teach an accurate and inclusive history. This whitewashing not only distorts students' understanding of the past but also undermines the critical engagement necessary for a comprehensive and just education. By reducing BIPOC experiences to mere footnotes or excluding them altogether, the curriculum furthers a form of historical amnesia, ensuring that students are not equipped with the tools to recognize the ongoing effects of systemic injustice and inequality.

In essence, scripted curricula reinforces a hidden curriculum that prioritizes standardization over authenticity, conformity over critical thinking, and compliance over professional judgment. By stripping educators of their autonomy and reducing history to a one-dimensional narrative, these frameworks prevent students from grappling with the complexities of history and recognizing the systemic inequalities that persist today. The result is an education system that not only marginalizes BIPOC perspectives but also fails to prepare students to engage thoughtfully with the diverse world around them. This framework becomes a tool of information control, shaping students' understanding of the world in ways that reinforce existing power structures and limit their capacity for empathy, critical thinking, and action.

The ongoing debate surrounding Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education highlights a broader unease among many Americans about discussing race, particularly in academic settings. According to Washington and Herteen (2024), this unease reflects a preference among certain political figures to ignore or downplay issues of national shame, such as slavery, racism, global warming, and foreign intervention, in favor of presenting a more sanitized version of American history. In their view, these figures aim to control the narrative surrounding the nation's history by deliberately omitting or whitewashing uncomfortable truths about racial oppression. The result is not only a distortion of history but also a missed opportunity for social and political change, as confronting these difficult issues might spur societal progress (Washington & Herteen, 2024).

This avoidance of race-related discussions is deeply rooted in the United States' historical treatment of Black people and racial discrimination. Washington and Herteen (2024) explain that the nation's discomfort with addressing race dates back to its early days, where enslaved African Americans were dehumanized and treated as property rather than as human beings. This dehumanization allowed white Americans to absolve themselves of any moral responsibility toward Black people, setting a precedent for racial silence, ignorance, and violence that has persisted for centuries (Washington & Herteen, 2024). This legacy of white supremacy, embedded in the nation's foundation, continues to influence contemporary conversations on race and racial justice. By maintaining a historical narrative that excludes the painful realities of slavery and segregation, the education system perpetuates a cycle of racial violence and discrimination that remains largely unchallenged.

In further efforts to control the narrative, textbooks in certain states such as Alabama, Texas, and Oklahoma have employed euphemisms and omissions to obscure the reality of slavery (Washington & Herteen, 2024). For instance, terms like the "Atlantic Triangular Trade" have been used in place of explicitly discussing slavery, and in some cases, enslaved people have been portrayed as mere "workers" rather than as victims of a brutal and oppressive system. These euphemisms serve to minimize the severity of slavery and reframe it in a less confrontational light. Washington and Herteen (2024) argue that such revisions of history are not merely unintentional oversights but deliberate attempts to maintain a narrative that protects the status quo and avoids confronting the nation's past transgressions. The failure to teach an accurate and critical history of slavery and its ongoing impact on racial inequality is a form of historical revisionism that perpetuates racial ignorance and denies the gravity of past injustices.

Moreover, research by Conner (2021) suggests that while people of color (POC) are sometimes included in historical narratives, their inclusion is often superficial and fails to challenge dominant historical frameworks. Rather than providing a nuanced understanding of racial and cultural histories, this tokenism reinforces the traditional narrative and maintains the status quo. According to Conner (2021), such inclusion does not promote a deeper understanding of the complexities of racial struggles but instead marginalizes alternative perspectives, leaving students unaware of the historical and ongoing fight for racial justice. By relegating POC histories to the sidelines and failing to critically examine their contributions to social change, educational systems further entrench systems of racial inequality.

The critics argued that CRT was fostering a climate of hate against the United States, professed on rejecting the values on which the nation was built, indoctrinating people into a

misguided sense of victimhood and resentment, as well as falsely positing the existence of systemic forms of discrimination and disenfranchisement (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). These critics, often aligned with political or ideological agendas, are vocal in their rejection of frameworks like Critical Race Theory (CRT) because they challenge the conventional narrative that the United States is a meritocratic society free of systemic racial issues. This dismissal is an attempt to silence conversations about race, avoiding discomfort, and eliminating the acknowledgment of past and present forms of oppression.

Additionally, a teacher's intent and pedagogical expertise do not protect from strict punishment if it's found that the teacher has accidentally runs afoul of a CRT ban, such as Tennessee's (Krebs, 2022, p. 1949). The risk of punishment for violating CRT bans illustrates how deeply information control is embedded within the educational system. Teachers, who might otherwise be able to engage in nuanced discussions of race and history, are now constrained by legal and political pressures, which prioritize the avoidance of controversial topics over the provision of a well-rounded, truthful education. This fear of retribution encourages self-censorship, further entrenching a narrative that privileges comfort over truth.

These patterns of exclusion, revisionism, and tokenistic inclusion in the curriculum are part of a broader effort to control the flow of historical knowledge. This control not only distorts students' understanding of the nation's past but also inhibits their ability to engage meaningfully with current struggles for racial justice and equality.

A Power Trip Through Education

The following is a poem that I have written to explain my experiences with two toxic principals in the industry of the educational system.

The Boss

I need you to do this —
You should have known I'd ask for this.
But, no, not that way.
That is too much. Do it again.
You didn't do this good enough.
This wasn't done my way —
Even when I'm wrong, I'm still right.
I said:
Do this, don't do that.
I talk in circles so you can give me squares.
Your idea would have worked —
But only if I suggested it.
If I can't attach my name,
Then it's not acceptable, it means nothing,
You are nothing. I could replace you
Before you could collect your things.
Your ideas belong to me — so I can pretend
That I think you are an asset.
You're mainly a liability. Your mistake-
(s) will live longer than you.
The good things? Never remembered,
While the bad things become sewn
To your skin — tattoos of your sins.
The line on your grave aligned
Between two dates clearly only represents
Your toxic traits. Unless
You consider — as I do —
Your existence is your biggest mistake.
When I shine on that pedestal,
You're knocked off. No one
Will remember you. Even though
You taste a glimmer of hope,
It's just burnt metallic.
My victory, not yours.
I control this narrative — your fate,
Your potential and promise are myths —
Bullshit, fairy tales, fake.
I contain your future, whether or not
You can afford to put food on your plate.
I have the power, I hold
The power. I am the power.

I am your principal. I am your boss.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Promoting feelings of guilt or unworthiness

Reflection and Analysis

I have had too many experiences where principals have acted like dragons breathing down the necks of their teachers, whether they are micromanaging an educator's classroom or criticizing the educator. This dynamic often creates a stifling environment for teachers, one where they feel scrutinized rather than supported. Administrators would frequently enter the classroom to conduct observations, which were limited to a brief fifteen-minute snapshot of a lesson. Despite the brevity of these visits, they would generate a lengthy list of perceived flaws —often longer than the amount of minutes they had spent observing. These observations were then ranked against a pre-determined rubric designed to evaluate certain characteristics the administration aimed to improve. For many educators, achieving the highest ratings on these metrics felt nearly impossible.

Michael Fullan (2023) captures this issue in *The Principal 2.0*, stating, "[Principals] are being called on to micromanage, whereby they go after instruction in detail, teacher by teacher" (p. 23). This micromanagement not only undermines teacher autonomy but also contributes to a culture of distrust and pressure. Dufour and Mattos (2013) further critique this practice, explaining that "[the] premise behind the policy of having principals observe teachers and help them improve is fundamentally flawed." Their observation underscores the inherent issues in

such evaluation systems, which often fail to provide meaningful or constructive feedback for professional growth. Instead, these practices can erode morale and make teachers feel as though they are perpetually falling short of unattainable standards.

This approach to leadership often prioritizes critique over collaboration, creating an atmosphere where educators are less likely to experiment, innovate, or feel confident in their teaching methods. It shifts the focus away from fostering supportive relationships and mutual growth between administrators and teachers, which are critical for a thriving educational environment.

$tudent $upport

My most recent experience with teaching was working for a virtual education company that was an independent contractor. The company connected me to the jobs. The first year went fantastic, so I happily renewed my contract to pursue a full-time schedule like I had the previous year. I was given only a part-time schedule, with dedicated promises of more jobs coming in sooner than later. I was given classes of sixth graders, ninth graders, and twelfth graders. I gave the company the benefit of the doubt and waited a few months. There still were no jobs available, but there were still hefty promises being spoken. Right before the company announced that they laid off many of their leading staff members, I accepted another job and gave my two weeks to the company.

My students were completely devastated, and of course asked me why I was leaving them abruptly. I stated the truth—I had accepted another job and that I would only be their teacher for another week. I did not mention money, but they were able to decode the statement. The ninth graders told me that they would Cash App me some funds. One ninth grader told me that he

would give me the rest of his allowance. I laughed and continued the lesson. The sixth graders—when given that answer—decided to make me a GoFundMe to show to the world. I told them that they did not need to do that but I truly appreciated their kindness. It was near the end of class, so I dismissed them and went about the rest of my day.

Later on that day, I saw my e-mail, and it was full of urgent e-mails asking me to meet with the company as soon as possible in order to address a complaint. They stated that some students made a GoFundMe and that the school received several complaints about it. I sent them a reply and said that I did not endorse that. It was Friday, so I figured that I would meet with them on Monday. I then saw another e-mail that declared that my account for the school was suspended.

I was called into a virtual meeting where I was informed that my resignation was expedited—that I would not be paid for the last week because I was not going to be allowed to teach the last week. I did not officially get to say goodbye to my students, and that was completely devastating for me.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Phobia indoctrination by terrible consequences occurring upon leaving

Reflection and Analysis

Retaliation is quite a common act of an employer in which is feeling betrayed by their employee for leaving their position, especially for those who appear to leave abruptly. This is also a commonplace tenet of the educational system—for both teachers as well as students.

Students are provided with an opportunity to discharge themselves from the educational system before the official age of graduation, but there are threatened with their futures only being associated with "burger flipping" jobs. They are offered with high school diploma equivalents, but they are often looked down as lesser than for going through those alternative routes of graduation.

Scientology retaliatory practices include and consist of what they call "Fair Game," by which they use to hunt down and find previous devotees who have deflected from the group (Rinder, 2022). While the educational system does not necessarily stalk deflectors, they do target and track students who are truant or have missed a certain amount of allotted days at school. Many times, they will even rely on police officers to do home visits if they cannot find a staff member to do them (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

As for teachers, many have experienced episodes where their principals have retaliated towards them for a variety of reasons. These experiences can be mind-altering for anyone due to the incorporation of pure human emotions into the situation, but teachers oftentimes experience these feelings because of the behaviors of their administrators (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). Gravley et al. (2015) stated that these "physical and emotional reactions to the retaliation episode [are] similar to those responses that occur subsequent to other types of traumatic events" (p. 185). This contributes to why and why not teachers leave the school—and oftentimes, they will leave the profession of teaching.

De Wet (2010) discussed why principals bully their teachers; this is because the "workplace bully is unwilling to endure any opposition or criticism, [and because they] are extremely authoritarian and preoccupied with power" (p. 1455). In my example, the principal

appeared to be threatened by my lifestyle and did not want that type of lifestyle in his school building, primarily due to his own political interests and personal beliefs. In tandem, these interests and beliefs encouraged him to go against anyone different from him.

The Revolution Will Not Be Scheduled

Many people have always stereotypically stated that teachers have the best schedule because they receive an extensive amount of time off work that is not exclusive to other professions. A lot of people who are looking in declare that teachers deserve low pay because they are able to take summers off. They have also said that students have it a lot easier than their family members who work, because they also receive the summers off of school.

As a student, it was extremely daunting to wake up before the sun came up to get ready for school. As a teacher, it was also a daunting task to wake up before the sun came up to get ready for work. Most of the time, I would arrive to my school building before the sun came up.

It oftentimes felt as if taking a sick day because I was legitimately sick was harder than actually attending work. The creation of substitute plans was more of a burden than conquering any type of sickness. Therefore, I did not take any sick days because I did not want the burden of having administration interfere with my classroom routine due to the lack of traditional lesson plans. I rarely put my lesson plans down on paper; I am able to modify lessons on the go. It was easier for me to come up with assignments and tasks for my students on the fly instead of relying on a concrete lesson plan.

Before the official cancellation of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I became extremely sick. I could not move, see, walk, taste, or smell. I was stuck in bed without a literal way to prepare substitute plans. I had just gotten switched over to being the kindergarten through

second grade teacher at the day treatment facility, so I was not prepared to even generate any type of lesson plan. I had to take sick time—I had absolutely no choice or say in the matter.

One of my colleagues posted in a "Teacher Problems" Facebook group when her paraprofessional had to cover for me during that time. I happened to be a member of that same group, and it popped up on my Facebook feed almost instantaneously. She was complaining that her para had to be removed from the classroom for the day, and the teacher that her para was covering for did not leave any lesson plans. Additionally, she made a comment on that post that mentioned that I apparently had my makeup collection more organized in the classroom than I did my lesson plans and classroom materials.

"You know that I can see this, right?" I commented.

Fellow teachers from across the Facebook world were defending me in the comments, because that comment was totally unwarranted. When I came back to school after being sick, the teacher then had sent me a gift basket to apologize. I felt like she only apologized because she had gotten caught making those comments in a public forum and she felt embarrassed about it.

Even during the global pandemic that shut down our in-person facility, teachers at my school were faced with a boss who would either announce at staff meetings who was out due to COVID that week or visit every teacher in the building to tell them who was just diagnosed with COVID from our in-house testing. Once, my boss came to visit me to let me know that one of my work friends had COVID. I immediately texted my friend, and she told me that she did not know that she had COVID because they had not reached out to her with her results. They had reached out to our boss's boss, who then in turn reached out to our boss. My friend obviously felt violated with the boss going around announcing her test results to the entire staff—which was

justifiable. My friend got that settled quickly; she said something to someone in power and my boss never announced who was out with COVID again albeit it being obvious if a staff member was not in attendance.

Also during the pandemic, the school administration was practically harassing the staff about the COVID vaccine. They had started to send out e-mails that inquired about each staff member's status with receiving the COVID vaccines. They accidentally sent out their list with each staff member's response in which each staff members indicated yes, no, or maybe they would consider receiving the vaccines. Anyone who indicated "yes" or "maybe" was automatically generated a scheduled time to receive the first vaccine. As for myself, I did not feel like arguing with my boss anymore and just went to the facility during my scheduled time to receive my vaccine.

They went above that and started discussing protocol that would state that anyone who did not have the vaccines would not be eligible to work there anymore. Their "no" list was growing; they eventually gave up the battle when they realized that too many members of the staff would become unemployed if that went into effect.

When we finally returned to in-person school sessions, I got written up for not telling my boss that I was sick even though I had called out of work the day prior. She claimed that she assumed that I was going to be well enough to attend work that day, even though she was quite aware that I was sick. She also was very hesitant about approving my PTO for a day before spring break, which seems to be the standard protocol for many schools. However, I had let her know about my requested time off over a month in advance.

Soon after that, the school secretary was battling some health issues. She came to work even though she was hurting and was truly sick. I would visit her every morning to check in on her and encourage her to take a day off. She would not listen to me but one specific day, I pretty much gave her an extended lecture about how she needed to rest.

The next day, she didn't come to work. I assumed that she took my advice and took a day off to rest. I did not think twice about it. However, I was approached by the school counselor soon after the school day started. She had let me know that the school secretary had a heart attack overnight and died. I was devastated. My friend had literally worked herself to death for this school, and the only reason why they acknowledged her existence was because she was no longer in existence.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control; Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Regulates individual's physical reality; Restrict leisure, entertainment, vacation; Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals; Impose rigid rules and regulations; Instill dependency and obedience; Manipulation of sleep; Promoting feelings of guilt or unworthiness

Reflection and Analysis

Williams and Shapiro (2018) stated that the way that "school schedules are currently organized hinders student performance" (p. 169). This assertion highlights the critical issue of how rigidly structured school hours are designed, without fully accounting for the diverse needs of both students and educators. The current system, in which every public school starts and ends at specific times, is primarily determined by logistical factors, such as bus routes and the amount

of time necessary to comply with state-mandated instructional minutes. This one-size-fits-all approach does not account for variations in individual student needs, peak learning times, or even the biological rhythms of students and teachers.

Most public schools start before nine in the morning, with a general dismissal time between three and four in the afternoon. While this schedule has been in place for decades, it fails to address key factors like adolescent sleep patterns and attention spans, which often do not align with the early start times. Studies have shown that students, especially teenagers, have later sleep-wake cycles and experience difficulty performing optimally during early morning hours. The early start time can be particularly detrimental for students who struggle with mental health issues, sleep disorders, or those who simply cannot function at their best during early hours. This misalignment between natural sleep cycles and the current schedule results in decreased attention, engagement, and overall performance.

Furthermore, the structure of the school day is designed to maximize instructional minutes based on state guidelines, but it often overlooks the need for students to have sufficient breaks, opportunities for movement, and time to process and retain information. These rigid hours do not allow for the flexibility needed to support a more holistic and responsive approach to learning. In fact, extended periods of sitting and the pressure of a tightly scheduled day can contribute to burnout, stress, and a lack of motivation among students.

Additionally, the challenges faced by educators in this system are significant. As Whiteleather (2024) noted, "Securing a substitute teacher (which some schools require), shifting more work to their colleagues, or losing out on attendance-based incentives all factor into a teacher's decision whether it's worth taking a day to rest and recover." This highlights the strain

that the rigid school schedule places not only on students but also on teachers. The pressure to meet attendance requirements, the difficulty of finding substitutes, and the impact on their workload make it harder for teachers to take necessary time off to recover from illness or burnout. Consequently, many teachers feel compelled to work while ill, potentially worsening their own health and increasing the risk of spreading illness to students. This exacerbates the cycle of stress and overwork that undermines the overall effectiveness of the school system.

In sum, the current school schedule, designed with limited consideration for the well-being and individual needs of both students and teachers, can have far-reaching consequences for performance, health, and overall school climate. Reforming school schedules to better accommodate the natural rhythms of students and teachers, incorporate more flexibility, and promote well-being could lead to a more effective and sustainable education system.

Career Sponsored By: Caffeination!

As a student as a well as a teacher, I have fought many battles against sleep and joining society. It felt as if I should not be awake when the sun was not even out yet. I suspect I started feeling as no amount of rest was enough when I started student teaching. I would never snooze the alarm clark, but I always consumed a copious amount of caffeine throughout the day in order to remain present in the world of existence.

Upon asking students on a daily basis how they were feeling, the majority of them would proclaim to me that they were always tired or sleepy. Many of them would simply fall asleep with their heads on their desks after responding to my daily question. Some of my students would curl up in a corner and start lightly snoring—I could not bear myself to wake them up from that peaceful dreamland.

I was taught that some students faced an abundance of external circumstances that hindered their ability to sleep, and falling asleep in the classroom usually meant that students considered the classroom to be a safe space for them. Administration praised teachers in public who could cultivate a safe space for their classes. However, administration would still blame me as the teacher for the students falling asleep in class; they claimed that I was not engaging effectively enough with the students in order to keep them fully awake. Even equipped with evidence of the opposite, it was still another item on the list to reprimand me about.

Who was I to comment on the students falling asleep if I wanted to go back to sleep in the middle of the day myself?

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control

Characteristic(s)

Regulates individual's physical reality; Restrict leisure, entertainment, vacation; Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals; Impose rigid rules and regulations; Instill dependency and obedience; Manipulation of sleep

Reflection and Analysis

Sleep patterns, especially in adolescents, are influenced by circadian rhythms that are significantly different from those of younger children or adults. Circadian rhythms are internal biological clocks that regulate sleep-wake cycles and other physiological processes. During adolescence, the body's natural sleep rhythm shifts, leading teens to feel more awake at night and sleepy later in the morning. This shift in sleep preferences, known as a delayed sleep phase, is a natural part of growing up, but it is often at odds with societal structures, particularly school

schedules. Most high schools begin early in the morning, forcing adolescents to wake up at times when their bodies are still geared toward sleep. This misalignment between their biological sleep needs and school start times results in chronic sleep deprivation throughout the school week (Hansen et al., 2005, p. 1555).

This sleep deprivation impacts students in various ways, particularly in terms of cognitive function, mood regulation, and overall productivity. Studies have shown that sleep is essential for learning, memory consolidation, and emotional stability. When adolescents do not get enough sleep, their ability to retain information, focus during lessons, and engage in critical thinking is severely compromised. They are more prone to irritability, difficulty concentrating, and even emotional outbursts. These factors can affect classroom behavior and academic performance, ultimately hindering their overall success.

Sleep deprivation has a similar impact on teachers, though in different ways. Teachers, too, often suffer from irregular sleep patterns, especially if they have to stay up late preparing lessons or grading assignments. The demanding nature of teaching, with its constant energy requirements, can lead to exhaustion and a lack of focus. Teachers may experience brain fog, reduced empathy, and increased irritability, which in turn affects their interactions with students. Moreover, the monotonous nature of some teaching environments, with long hours spent lecturing or conducting repetitive tasks, can lead to burnout or disengagement, which further affects their performance in the classroom.

Beyond the cognitive and emotional impacts, sleep deprivation can also make individuals more susceptible to manipulation. This is particularly relevant in environments where authority figures use techniques to influence behavior or control attention. In educational settings,

repetitive, long, or tedious sessions can induce a trance-like state in students and teachers. The body's response to prolonged periods of exhaustion, coupled with the rhythmic or repetitive nature of certain teaching methods, can cause individuals to become drowsy, disengaged, or even fall asleep. In this state, they may be more easily influenced by the material being presented, or less likely to resist authority or challenge ideas.

In some cases, this susceptibility to manipulation is consciously exploited. Hassan (2024) describes how formal indoctrination sessions—used in certain educational or organizational contexts—can be draining and rhythmic, inducing a hypnotic or trance-like state in participants. While students or teachers may fall asleep in these sessions, they are often reprimanded for their natural response to fatigue. However, the state of drowsiness is not simply a consequence of physical tiredness—it is a result of the hypnotic or suggestive environment that has been created. In these situations, the sleep deprivation serves a dual purpose: it weakens the individual's resistance and makes them more compliant to the authority or ideas being presented.

Thus, sleep deprivation becomes a tool of influence, affecting how individuals perceive and interact with the world around them. In educational settings, both students and teachers can become less resistant to the messages being communicated, whether they are academic concepts, behavioral expectations, or social norms. The overall result is a more controlled, compliant environment, where critical thinking and independent thought are dulled by the effects of sleep deprivation. This highlights the importance of aligning educational structures—such as school start times—with the natural sleep patterns of adolescents to foster better cognitive function, emotional well-being, and overall productivity.

Fear(less)

I remember always being intimidated by principals.

The first principal that I remember having in elementary school was the shadow of an empty threat. When kids were sent to her office, they were made to sit on a bench in front of the office itself with no apparent supervision and no consequences. My first grade self had kicked a classmate in P.E. class, but was sent to the unsupervised bench and eventually sent back to class without consequence.

I switched elementary schools, and remember coming face-to-face with the person who scared me the most at that period: the principal. Her face seemed to have the appearance of Cruella de Vil and her eyes appeared to resemble Scar's wrath from *The Lion King*. She tried to establish a rapport with us students, but it was still hard to look past the scariness in her eyes. She would gather the entire elementary school in the gym and read us chapters of books such as *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry as well as *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli.

When I was in middle school, the principal called my mom to alert her that I may or may not be a lesbian. Also, I vividly remember when I received detention from my eighth grade Spanish teacher. The offense? I was putting on too much lipgloss in class. I received detention five separate times for the same offense before I got tired of receiving detentions for ridiculous offenses. Also, I remember when the fashion/sewing teacher in high school decided to confiscate my purse from me because she said that I was putting too much lipgloss on my mouth during class. In no way was I disturbing the learning of others.

In hindsight, those incidents were NOTHING in comparison to what I would experience as a teacher. These behaviors were not exclusive to schools directly towards behavioral

redirection. I remember teaching a lesson in the public school where a child raised his hand and said in a robotic monotone voice: "You're the reason why I have tried to kill myself multiple times." I have been called many names in my career, but that line was the sentence that personally wounded me even though the child did receive a consequence for that one.

In the public school, students would be given the consequence of in school suspension and out of school suspension for actions like cussing and being tardy to class. I remember that once one of my students interrupted my lesson to tell me that I was the primary reason as to why he tried to commit suicide multiple times. As a mandated reporter, I reported those comments to both the counselor and the administration. Before I could make an official report, they had already suspended the student. One student that I had was given out of school suspension; he was found to have run away during his time in out of school suspension and took up shelter in an abandoned house where his corpse was later discovered. Some other kids had set the abandoned house on fire—it was never clear if they knew that he was sleeping in the house when the fire occurred. A ten year old was charged with abandonment of a corpse because he was missing for so long before his body was discovered. My principal did not acknowledge his death. In fact, my principal seemed to possess a joyous energy about the student's departure from the earth.

As I became more involved in my teaching career, I spent many years working with children with behavior difficulties who were placed in an alternative school setting because no one else had any type of answer. It had astonished me that some of the following behaviors occurred without detrimental consequences:

- Calling each other and myself out of their name; insulting every aspect of my being
- Punching me in bridge of the nose, causing two black eyes

- Bringing a suffocated rabbit into school

- Spitting on me

- Throwing shoes directly at my head

- Throwing desks across the room

- Throwing scissors and freshly sharpened pencils at my face

- Elopement from the classroom and from the school building itself

The biggest consequence would be that a student would be removed from the classroom and sent to the 'safe room.' Most of my students would act out to get sent to the safe room; they enjoyed the camaraderie that it contained. Not only did they get out of their classwork, they would also get access to the assistant principal who let them watch television, play with toys, or eat candy. I even caught some of my students in the safe room playing in each other's hair. I had commented on the contradiction, but the assistant principal was not happy with me for saying something.

I started to refuse to send kids to the safe room, even when they were derailing the learning of their peers. Once, I had a student who repeatedly called me the three letter f-word and then told me that my daughter was going to hell in a sing-song fashion for what seemed like hours. I told the other students that I would give them candy if they ignored the student. Apparently, staff outside of the classroom who could hear through the walls got tired of hearing the commotion so the assistant principal came and got him anyway. It taught him that no matter how long his behavior lasted, he would still get what he wanted.

Besides going to the safe room, students would practically beg for trips to the psych ward as punishment, in which they have considered as a reward. I would ask them why they wanted to

get sent to a place where there were even more restrictions on them than where they were, but they felt as if it was more freeing there.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control

Characteristic(s)

Rewards and punishments used to modify behavior

Reflection and Analysis

The use of consequences for inappropriate behaviors, often seen in educational systems and other institutional frameworks, reveals significant flaws in their efficacy and validity. These methods, rooted in punitive measures and behavior control, frequently fail to address the underlying causes of behavior while promoting a system of manipulation and control aligned with the BITE model. By examining the mechanisms and impacts of these practices, it becomes evident that they not only fall short in fostering genuine behavioral change but also perpetuate a cycle of harm and compliance-driven outcomes.

Punitive consequences, such as suspensions and expulsions, are a cornerstone of disciplinary practices in many schools. However, these measures disproportionately impact low-performing students and serve to distort academic metrics. As Simmons (2014) notes, "A large percentage of the two million students suspended and expelled annually are low performing. Their absence skews the student testing population toward proficiency, making it possible for schools to reap rewards for achievement gains in standardized tests" (p. 91). This highlights a disturbing reality: punitive measures are not solely about correcting behavior but are often wielded as tools to manipulate institutional outcomes. Rather than supporting struggling

students, these consequences effectively exclude them from the educational environment, exacerbating existing inequities and reinforcing systemic failures.

Corporal punishment further exemplifies the problematic nature of punitive consequences. Despite its controversial status, "Nineteen US states currently allow public school personnel to use corporal punishment to discipline children from the time they start preschool until they graduate 12th grade" (Font & Gershoff, 2017, p. 408). The continued use of physical punishment raises ethical and psychological concerns, as it teaches compliance through fear rather than fostering an understanding of appropriate behavior. Such practices undermine trust between students and educators and can have long-lasting negative effects on a child's emotional and psychological well-being.

Moreover, corporal punishment reinforces the normalization of violence as a tool for control, perpetuating cycles of harm both within and beyond institutional settings. Behavior modification strategies often rely on rewards and punishments to mold individuals into conforming to desired standards. Hassan (2024) observes that "By controlling a person's environment, using behavior modification to reward some behaviors and suppress others, [they] may indeed reprogram a person's identity" (p. 130). This chilling reality underscores the extent to which behavior control mechanisms extend beyond mere discipline and venture into identity manipulation. By shaping behavior through external incentives and deterrents, these systems prioritize compliance over autonomy, stripping individuals of their agency and intrinsic motivation. This approach aligns with the BITE model, wherein behavior control is a key mechanism for maintaining dominance and compliance within hierarchical structures.

The reliance on punitive consequences and behavior modification reveals a deeper agenda of control rather than correction. These systems often prioritize institutional metrics and authority over the genuine needs and development of individuals. The emphasis on rewards and punishments creates an environment where behaviors are dictated by external pressures rather than internalized values or understanding. Students and individuals subjected to such systems may exhibit surface-level compliance, but the absence of authentic engagement or understanding often results in a lack of lasting behavioral change.

Furthermore, punitive measures and behavior modification practices frequently ignore the root causes of inappropriate behavior. Many behaviors deemed "inappropriate" are manifestations of unmet needs, trauma, or systemic inequalities. Addressing these underlying factors requires compassion, resources, and a holistic approach—elements that are notably absent in punitive systems. Instead, these systems operate on the assumption that individuals are inherently defiant or deviant, perpetuating stigmatization and exclusion rather than fostering growth or understanding.

The systemic flaws in relying on consequences for inappropriate behaviors reveal the invalidity of such approaches. They are inherently designed to promote control, compliance, and the preservation of institutional power, often at the expense of individual well-being and development. By prioritizing metrics and authority over compassion and understanding, these systems fail to achieve their stated goals of fostering appropriate behavior and instead perpetuate cycles of harm and inequality. The alignment of these practices with the principles of the BITE model further emphasizes their role as tools of manipulation and dominance, raising critical ethical questions about their continued use.

The Gospel of Popularity

Student clubs, extracurriculars, and activities were promoted as cornerstones of the typical high school experience. It was encouraged to get involved in these activities in order to write it on college applications and to demonstrate a social presence in the school building in general. I was in show choir my freshman year of high school, but then joined other random clubs throughout the rest of the years in order to fulfill the unwritten rules of high school.

Even though I was not officially "out of the closet" in high school, there were still people who were proudly out in my class of half a thousand. I did not officially "come out" until I was in college because of the stigma that was coming out back in the early 2010s. Many students tried to start a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) at school, but the principal declined it even though they had a staff sponsor.

They did not decline to have the presence of Christian clubs in the school building.

See You At The Pole was an annual event that was highly promoted via school advertisements. It happened before school officially started for the day, but the event still occurred on school property. I decided to join to see what all of the fuss was about so I joined them one year at the flagpole. I remember gathering around the pole, shivering in the morning dew. I cannot remember what was said, but I do remember that it was a prayer. I never went to that kind of event again.

Young Life is a club that promotes Christian values (Schnitker et al, 2014, p. 86). They initially had portrayed themselves as devoted Christians who loved everybody. However, I recall that Young Life was brandished with the popular kids; they would constantly plaster their club images on Facebook with their white, tanned, skinny bodies dressed in revealing two-piece

swimwear—all in the name of the Young Life club. They passed out advertisements in the cafeteria and hung up posters in the hallways, knowing that everyone who was anybody had already joined the club. It was strictly for those who already qualified by way of their levels of popularity. It was only in hindsight that I had come to this realization, but I saw their smiling faces on Facebook and I wanted to join their club—not for the religious aspect. They even had their bright, shiny smiles featured in a school sponsored yearbook photograph.

Other Christian clubs throughout the community made their presence known in the school building. For example, a youth group that had a strong following would also promote themselves. I had gone to the youth group in the past, with a steadfast hope to find some friends. I found some friends, and we came to the conclusion that the youth group was a toxic place to be. The members of the youth group had found out about my secret before I officially came out, and they bullied me into thinking that I was damaged goods.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control; Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Discourage individualism, encourage groupthink; Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness: Identity guilt; Your affiliations are unwise; Social guilt

Reflection and Analysis

Christian clubs have long held a prominent place in many schools, while organizations that encourage individuality and inclusivity, such as LGBTQ+ clubs, face significant challenges in gaining similar recognition and support. This disparity reveals systemic inequities that privilege a singular worldview—often centered on Christian ideology—while marginalizing

diverse perspectives. By exploring these practices and their implications through the lens of the BITE model (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional control), we can see how such policies reinforce behavior control and restrict individuality among students.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits government entities, including public schools, from endorsing or promoting any particular religion (McCarthy, 2009). However, this foundational principle is frequently undermined by the overt promotion of Christianity within schools. For instance, recent actions by Oklahoma's state leadership exemplify the violation of this constitutional mandate. Oklahoma's school superintendent, Ryan Walters, stated that "[all] Oklahoma schools are required to incorporate the Bible, which includes the Ten Commandments, as an instructional support into the curriculum across specified grade levels, e.g., grades 5 through 12" (Blad, 2024). Such actions impose a particular religious framework on students, disregarding their individual rights to practice—or abstain from practicing—religion freely. These practices also ignore the diversity of student populations, many of whom may hold beliefs that differ from or directly oppose Christian teachings.

Simultaneously, schools often suppress or entirely exclude organizations that celebrate individuality, inclusivity, and diversity, such as LGBTQ+ clubs. Administrative policies frequently enable this suppression under the guise of maintaining order and avoiding disruption. As noted by Kahn and Gorski (2016), "[administrators] may reserve the right to abolish a club if it causes a 'disruption' in the school. These are subjective decisions, informed by combinations of prevailing gender and sexual identity norms, structural oppression, and desires on the parts of

some schools and districts to avoid controversy" (p. 23). This subjectivity disproportionately affects clubs that challenge dominant cultural norms, further entrenching systemic oppression.

Christian organizations like Young Life exemplify how religious clubs are not only permitted but actively supported within schools. Young Life, described as an "evangelistic Christian youth organization that seeks to introduce adolescents to the Christian faith," is present in all 50 US states and 46 countries. The organization's reach is vast, with more than 215,000 adolescents attending their summer camps annually (Schnitker et al., 2014). Young Life's prominence in schools reflects a clear preference for Christian-centered organizations, which are allowed to operate freely and even flourish, often with direct or indirect institutional support.

This imbalance promotes behavior control as outlined in the BITE model. By elevating Christian ideology while marginalizing alternative perspectives, schools create environments where conformity to a specific set of beliefs and behaviors is expected. Behavior control is evident in the restriction of non-Christian clubs and the imposition of Christian practices, such as incorporating the Bible into the curriculum. Information control is exercised through selective representation of religious narratives, ensuring that Christian ideology is presented as dominant while suppressing discussions about other beliefs or perspectives. Thought control occurs as students are encouraged—and often pressured—to internalize Christian values as the moral and societal norm. Emotional control emerges through the stigmatization of dissenting views and the creation of guilt or shame in students who do not conform to the promoted ideology.

The privileging of Christian clubs and suppression of others also foster a culture of exclusion. Students who do not identify as Christian or who are part of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, often feel alienated in such environments. This

dynamic enforces a homogenized school culture that erases individuality and discourages critical thinking, undermining the very purpose of education as a tool for personal and intellectual growth (Pearlman, 2020).

Furthermore, the promotion of Christian ideology as the one true religion—often without regard for denominational differences—illustrates the pervasive nature of this cultural imposition. While Christianity encompasses a wide array of beliefs and practices, the version presented in many schools tends to homogenize these differences, presenting a monolithic narrative that does not reflect the religion's complexity. This further alienates students who may identify with non-mainstream Christian denominations or other faiths entirely.

The suppression of LGBTQ+ clubs and similar organizations has real consequences for students' mental and emotional well-being. Research consistently shows that inclusive environments contribute to better outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth, including reduced rates of depression and suicide. By denying these students spaces to express themselves and find community, schools not only perpetuate structural oppression but also harm the very students they are meant to support and protect.

The unequal treatment of Christian clubs and organizations that promote individuality, such as LGBTQ+ clubs, highlights systemic biases within schools that privilege conformity and suppress diversity. These practices, often in violation of the Establishment Clause, enforce behavior control and undermine the principles of equality and inclusivity. By prioritizing one worldview at the expense of others, schools fail to honor the individuality and diversity of their students, perpetuating harm and reinforcing oppressive systems.

I'm an Honor Student, But I Failed the Tests!

I had never struggled with taking tests—besides in math—so when I was offered a chance to take Advanced Placement courses during my senior year of high school, I was not worried about passing the coinciding tests that went along with that option. I registered for AP Environmental Science and AP English, and went on my merry way.

When the spring came around and it was time to be surrounded by hundreds of my peers in the testing center, I was still not nervous. In fact, I considered myself as prepared and ready. I sat down to take the first test, and I was surprised. The test questions felt as if someone was playing a mean joke on me. I doubted my answers, and felt as if the material presented in the tests was not material that I was familiar with at all. Plus, there was an extreme time limit which meant that I did not have time to doubt myself as each question should have been answered in a minute or less in order to be able to finish on time. I was relieved when I was able to go home from those tests, as my responses to the test questions (both written and multiple choice) were haunting me in real time.

I was not surprised when I received my test scores and they indicated that I failed both tests. However, I was surprised because I felt as maybe I was overthinking the whole situation. Hundreds of dollars down the drain. Hundreds of dollars that I know my mother did not have to waste on silly tests that her honors student had failed.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Thought Control

Characteristic(s)

Require members to internalize the group's doctrine as truth; Instill black and white thinking; Rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism

Reflection and Analysis

Before the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were implemented, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) governed education policy in the United States. NCLB mandated that all students achieve 100% proficiency in both reading and math by a specific deadline (Yell et al., 2006). While the goal of ensuring educational equity for all students was admirable, the approach heavily emphasized standardized testing as the primary measure of success. This focus fundamentally reshaped classroom instruction, narrowing it to align almost exclusively with the tested material.

The systemic prioritization of test performance over holistic learning instilled a hierarchy of values in education: "Rule number one is that what matters is only what is tested. Rule number two is that good test scores matter. And there's no rule number three" (Driver, 2018, p. 49). This approach reduced complex intellectual engagement to a binary system of measurable success or failure, stifling creativity, exploration, and critical thought.

The reliance on standardized testing for high-stakes decision-making has roots dating back to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 3). However, the advent of NCLB escalated this practice, embedding testing deeply into the fabric of education policy. The shift from teaching for learning to teaching for testing is a direct embodiment of thought control as described in the BITE Model, particularly in the way it limits critical thinking.

The Thought Control element of the BITE Model highlights how systems can manipulate thinking to discourage individual analysis and foster dependence on prescribed frameworks. NCLB's emphasis on standardized testing created an environment where by design, the curriculum became focused on content that would appear on tests. Critical thinking, which often requires engaging with open-ended questions, diverse perspectives, and real-world problem-solving, was de-emphasized. Students and teachers alike were discouraged from venturing beyond the narrow confines of what was "testable." This prioritization aligns with the BITE Model's characteristic of controlling information to shape and reinforce desired thought patterns. Additionally, dissent and alternative perspectives are minimized in the school. Teachers were pressured to adhere strictly to test-related content, leaving little room for intellectual exploration or challenging the system. Schools with low test scores risked sanctions, and teachers faced professional consequences, fostering a culture of compliance over innovation. This mirrors how thought control discourages questioning of core assumptions or values within the system.

The structure of standardized tests inherently favors clear, single answers. This approach neglects the complexity of many issues and limits students' capacity to engage in the deeper, analytical thinking necessary for grappling with ambiguity. As Driver's statement underscores, the rules of the system teach students that only test outcomes matter, devaluing the process of learning itself.

The high stakes associated with testing—such as school funding, teacher evaluations, and student advancement—created an atmosphere of anxiety. This fear reinforces compliance and conformity, as both students and educators seek to avoid penalties. In the BITE Model

framework, fear-based motivation suppresses critical thinking by prioritizing self-preservation over inquiry.

By perpetuating an educational system rooted in teaching to the test, NCLB not only devalued critical thinking but also created a population more susceptible to manipulation. When students are taught to accept information without questioning its validity or exploring alternatives, they are less prepared to critically assess the world around them. This erosion of critical thinking skills has far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the classroom into civic life, where individuals are expected to analyze information, make decisions, and engage in democratic processes.

Ultimately, the rejection of critical thinking through teaching to the test aligns with the BITE Model's Thought Control characteristics by cultivating dependency on an authority-defined framework, suppressing dissent, and discouraging intellectual autonomy. The system's focus on rigid outcomes rather than meaningful learning undermines the foundational goals of education: to foster inquiry, creativity, and the ability to think critically in a complex world.

Burn, Baby, Burn!

One of my all-time favorite opening lines of literature is hands down, "it was a pleasure to burn" from the first page of Fahrenheit 451 (Bradbury, 1967). From reading that book when I was younger, I knew that the banning of specific books was going to be another challenge in the future.

I completed my Masters thesis on the implementation of LGBTQ+ literature in the classroom. Understandably, this was a controversial topic at the time; same-sex marriage had just become law of the land back during my second semester of graduate school. I had an

understanding that my thesis topic and the surrounding would most likely never become implemented in my future teaching career because of the discrimination that I had seen play out in the world with the LGBTQ+ community.

Many of the texts that I wrote about and crafted lesson plans about were books that were challenged in some shape or form. It was disheartening to see even children's books such as *And Tango Makes Three* argued against by many. In reality, *And Tango Makes Three* was a beautiful description of how different families live and how love manifests throughout these families.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Information Control

Characteristic(s)

Deliberately withholding information; Allowing only leadership to decide who needs to know what and when

Reflection and Analysis

Ferguson (2014) stated that it is of the belief that behavior modification occurs when children are exposed to the content of certain books—whether the content includes sex, drugs, or even rebellion towards sources of authority. This perspective underscores the role of literature in shaping young minds, as the themes and ideas presented within books have the potential to challenge or reinforce societal norms and values. As aforementioned, the educational system was initially established to prevent the rebellious nature of humans from going against what the authority demands from them. Historically, this framework sought to standardize thinking and maintain societal order by ensuring that education aligned with prevailing ideologies and power structures.

In modern contexts, this tendency is evident in the increasing prevalence of book bans in schools. For example, in the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America has counted more than 10,000 book bans in public schools. These bans disproportionately target works by marginalized groups, including authors of color, LGBTQ+ authors, and women. Books that address topics such as racism, sexuality, gender, and history have become focal points of censorship. These efforts to restrict access to diverse voices and perspectives align with historical patterns of control, whereby authorities limit exposure to ideas that could inspire critical thinking or dissent.

The motivations behind these book bans are often couched in rhetoric about protecting children from inappropriate or harmful material. However, as Shearer (2022) argues, "[current] book ban efforts led by conservative groups primarily target works that deal with race, racial justice, and the critical race movement and that are often written by minority authors. These attempts to silence minority voices, however, use pretextual arguments and an incorrect application of the First Amendment" (p. 26). This critique highlights the underlying political and ideological motivations driving censorship efforts, as well as the broader implications for freedom of expression and equity in education.

The act of banning books extends beyond the removal of certain titles from shelves. It serves as a broader mechanism for maintaining existing power dynamics and suppressing revolutionary or transformative ways of thinking. When the government or other influential entities impose limitations on classroom discourse, they inhibit students' ability to engage critically with complex issues and develop their own perspectives. This aligns with Ferguson's (2014) observation that behavior modification is a central goal of controlling access to particular

types of content. By restricting exposure to ideas that challenge dominant narratives, authorities

can shape behaviors and attitudes in ways that sustain the status quo.

This constriction of information can be further understood through the lens of the BITE

model. Information control involves the deliberate restriction or manipulation of information to

limit alternative viewpoints and critical inquiry. Book bans function as a form of information

control, as they restrict access to literature that could broaden students' understanding of societal

issues or challenge existing power structures. By narrowing the scope of permissible knowledge,

these actions hinder intellectual freedom and prevent individuals from forming independent,

informed opinions.

In this context, the current wave of book bans represents not only a threat to intellectual

freedom but also a deliberate effort to curtail the progress that marginalized communities have

made in asserting their voices and stories. The exclusion of works by minority authors and the

censorship of topics related to race, gender, and social justice reveal a fear of the transformative

potential of literature. Such actions reinforce systemic inequalities and deny students the

opportunity to engage with diverse perspectives that are essential for fostering critical thinking,

empathy, and social awareness.

No Thanks, Thanksgiving

As many others, I grew up learning about the peaceful meal between the Pilgrims and the

Native Americans that was enshrined as the "First" Thanksgiving. I never questioned the

information, as it was coupled with exciting activities as well as delicious food. Most kids enjoy

the prospect of any kind of celebration, even when they do not truly understand the background

information behind that celebration. As I was "most kids," I devoured the food but was not given

the opportunity to devour any kind of opposing information. Thanksgiving was an event that was promoted as a peaceful interaction between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans. There was no discussion of murder or violence—even at the high school level.

I was also taught the origination of Columbus Day with the classic tune of "Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492." We learned in school the names of Columbus's ships and how he somehow discovered the United States albeit his thoughts that the United States was India. We also learned about how the name he gave the United States was the West Indies. No one ever uttered a word about how Columbus and his army of men butchered, maimed, tortured, and killed so many people in order to "claim" the land. I did not learn this information until I was an adult, and I am unsure if my teachers even knew this information for themselves. They passed this story through generations without regard to the truth of what actually happened.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Information Control

Characteristic(s)

Deliberately withholding information; Allowing only leadership to decide who needs to know what and when

Reflection and Analysis

The way Thanksgiving and Columbus Day are taught in the American educational system serves as a clear example of promoting conformity while intentionally withholding critical information. These holidays, often presented through romanticized and sanitized narratives, perpetuate myths and exclude the violent histories associated with them. This approach not only shapes public consciousness but also aligns with the principles of information control as outlined

in the BITE Model, particularly the suppression and manipulation of information to serve ideological ends.

Thanksgiving, as taught in schools, often revolves around a story of harmonious relations between Pilgrims and Native Americans, culminating in the so-called "First Thanksgiving." This narrative, while comforting and celebratory, is deeply misleading. Byington (2021) critiques this portrayal, stating, "Every year teachers perpetuate the myths of the 'First Thanksgiving' and teach it as unassailable historical truth to millions of young people" (p. 204). The story omits critical aspects of history, such as the violent displacement, enslavement, and genocide of Native peoples that occurred before and after the feast. Instead, it presents a sanitized version that reinforces conformity to a nationalistic and colonial perspective.

Bickford (2021) further underscores this point, noting that the tale is "more myth than history," diverging significantly from the historical record. He highlights that even details like the participants' names and the food they ate are inaccurately portrayed (p. 62). This selective representation aligns with what Fryberg and Eason (2017) describe as "bias that manifests as omissions, which are aspects of the world that are invisible or intentionally left out of the public conscious" (p. 554). These omissions are not accidental but serve an ideological purpose, ensuring that students internalize a celebratory narrative devoid of critical reflection.

Similarly, Columbus Day is taught in a manner that elevates Columbus to the status of a hero, glossing over the atrocities he committed. Loewen (2018) observes, "American history books present Columbus pretty much without precedent, and they portray him as America's first great hero. . . . [Most textbooks] leave out virtually everything that is important to know about

Columbus and the European exploration of the Americas" (p. 32). This deliberate erasure includes the enslavement, exploitation, and mass killings of Indigenous peoples. Instead, textbooks fabricate details to humanize Columbus, ensuring that readers identify with him rather than question his actions.

Howard Zinn (2015) argues that this heroization is an "ideological choice" designed to justify conquest and genocide. He writes, "To emphasize the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discovers, and to deemphasize their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. . . . to justify what was done" (p. 9). By framing Columbus's actions as a necessary step toward progress, the educational system implicitly validates the violence and oppression that accompanied European colonization.

The selective narratives of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day reflect a broader strategy of information control. By presenting sanitized versions of history, the educational system limits students' access to diverse perspectives and suppresses critical analysis. This aligns with the BITE model's aspect of information control, which includes "withholding or distorting information, systematically lying to the cult member, and minimizing or discouraging access to non-cult sources of information."

For example, the narratives taught in schools discourage students from exploring primary sources or alternative histories that might challenge the dominant discourse. As Zinn (2015) points out, the treatment of Columbus and his victims illustrates "a certain approach to history, in which the past is told from the point of view of governments, conquerors, diplomats, [and] leaders" (p. 9). By foregrounding the perspectives of colonial powers while erasing those of

Indigenous peoples, the system ensures that students conform to a singular, state-sanctioned view of history.

The omission of Native American perspectives is particularly striking. Fryberg and Eason (2017) highlight that Native Americans experience "bias that manifests as omissions," which render their histories invisible (p. 554). These omissions extend to the violent realities underlying Thanksgiving and Columbus Day, which are celebrated despite their connections to genocide and oppression. Weiss (2017) notes that Native Americans have historically used Thanksgiving as a platform to voice dissent, calling for "ethnic inclusiveness" and challenging the "conservative" civil religious symbolism of the holiday (p. 380). However, these acts of resistance are rarely included in mainstream curricula, further marginalizing Indigenous voices.

The romanticized portrayals of these holidays serve a dual purpose: they promote national unity while discouraging dissent. By presenting a harmonious and heroic narrative, the educational system fosters a sense of pride and loyalty to the nation, suppressing critical inquiry into its darker histories. As Zinn (2015) observes, history books present these events as "heroic adventures," devoid of bloodshed or moral complexity (p. 7). This approach ensures that students internalize the values of conformity and obedience, aligning with the broader goals of the system.

The teaching of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day exemplifies how the educational system uses information control to shape public consciousness. By perpetuating myths, omitting critical perspectives, and romanticizing violent histories, it ensures conformity to a nationalistic and colonial ideology. This deliberate manipulation of information not only distorts historical

understanding but also marginalizes the voices of those who resist these narratives, reinforcing a system that prioritizes control over truth.

Mirage of Milk Mustaches

I remember collecting magazine cutouts of the famous Got Milk campaigns that showcased the smiling faces of people who either had a glass of milk in their hand and/or a milk mustache above their lips. I also had a commemorative book recollecting the different celebrity models that accumulated throughout the years. I would take the advertisements as well as the photographs featured in the memorabilia to decorate the walls of my young self's bedroom. The celebrity affiliates of the campaign fully engaged me in the belief that drinking cow's milk was the only preventative measure to take in order to avoid brittle bones.

At school, there were banners plastered on the walls of the cafeteria that promoted the campaign. I could not escape the campaign, as it was prominently featured in my everyday life from elementary school to high school. I distinctly remember how the posters were illuminated on the wall above the metallic-silver colored freezer that contained the day's choices of milk.

Therefore, I grew up believing that the only way to stop the formulation of brittle bones was by consuming the calcium that was linked to milk products. I did not like drinking milk by itself, as I thought it always tasted gross. I continued to drink it because I wanted to be "normal" —going against the grain would only proclaim me as "weird" and "not normal." Water was also never provided in the cafeteria unless it was an uncharged bottle of water or a short visit to the water fountain that was most likely contaminated with the germs of thousands of other kids and served with a side of "You're drinking the whole Missouri River! Hurry up!"

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Information Control

Characteristic(s)

Deception; Deliberately withhold information; Distort information to make it more acceptable; Extensive use of cult-generated information and propaganda, including: Newsletters, magazines, journals, audiotapes, videotapes, YouTube, movies and other media

Reflection and Analysis

The "Got Milk?" campaign, launched by the California Milk Processor Board in 1993 and later adopted nationally by the USDA's Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), represents one of the most successful marketing efforts in modern history. Its ability to influence consumer behavior, infiltrate popular culture, and promote the consumption of milk illustrates a calculated indoctrination strategy. Examining the campaign's techniques and cultural impacts reveals how advertising can blur the lines between marketing, health messaging, and cultural influence, often with unintended consequences.

The "Got Milk?" campaign utilized the power of celebrity endorsements to create widespread appeal. By featuring household names like Kermit the Frog, Naomi Campbell, and numerous other celebrities with the iconic milk mustache, the campaign positioned milk as not only a dietary staple but also a symbol of health and trendiness (Deane & Schultz, 2024, p. 2; Freeman, 2013, p. 1252). This strategy leveraged the cultural capital of celebrities to normalize milk consumption, particularly among younger audiences.

The campaign's integration into toys, such as the Got Milk? Barbie in 1995 and the Hot Wheels dairy-delivery truck in 1998, further embedded the message into the daily lives of

children (Deane & Schultz, 2024). These products aligned milk consumption with play and nostalgia, ensuring that the promotion of milk was omnipresent. Such tactics demonstrate how the campaign went beyond traditional advertising to influence lifestyle and identity.

The cultural saturation of the "Got Milk?" slogan is evident in its numerous parodies, such as "Got Jesus?" and "Got Beer?" (Kardashian, 2014). While these spin-offs often reflected humor or irreverence, they underscored the campaign's pervasiveness in public consciousness. The California Milk Processor Board even embraced this phenomenon by creating a poster compiling the parodies in 2005 (Kardashian, 2014). This indicates how the slogan transcended its original purpose to become a linguistic and cultural meme.

However, not all parodies were embraced. PETA's controversial "Got Pus? Milk Does" campaign highlighted the darker side of the dairy industry, including concerns about animal welfare and health risks. The California Milk Processor Board's threat to sue PETA reveals the tension between the campaign's polished image and the criticisms it sought to deflect (Kardashian, 2014).

One of the more contentious aspects of the "Got Milk?" campaign was its targeted marketing toward African American and Latina/o communities through campaigns like "Toma Leche?" (Freeman, 2013, p. 1252). These efforts, while expanding the campaign's reach, inadvertently exacerbated health disparities. African Americans and Latina/os are disproportionately affected by lactose intolerance and related health conditions, such as obesity and diabetes. By promoting milk consumption to these populations, the campaign prioritized profits over public health, disregarding the physiological differences that make milk consumption problematic for many (Freeman, 2013, p. 1252).

The success of the "Got Milk?" campaign lies in its ability to weave itself into the cultural fabric, presenting milk as a universal good. However, this success also raises ethical questions. The campaign's reliance on celebrity endorsements, its targeting of vulnerable populations, and its cultural ubiquity suggest a form of indoctrination that prioritized consumption over critical engagement with the product's health implications.

Overall, the "Got Milk?" campaign serves as a case study in the power of advertising to shape cultural norms and consumer behavior. While its marketing brilliance is undeniable, its legacy is complicated by the health disparities it perpetuated and the ethical concerns it raised. As such, it represents both the heights of marketing innovation and the pitfalls of prioritizing industry goals over public well-being.

Shock, with a Side of Guilt

When I was younger, I remember PETA serving as a model of a group that was outwardly strange. To me, they published outrageous advertisements about the incorporation of fur into people's lives. I saw celebrities such as Pamela Anderson and Alicia Silverstone in nothing but a censored image proclaiming that they would rather have their nude bodies exposed than wear fur on their bodies. As a child, I paid no mind to what fabrics, textiles, and materials that I wore on my body since I did not pay for or pick out my clothes; as many children, I did not have control over what type of clothes I wore or what these clothes were made of. Rather, I would see these advertisements in the pages of magazines and think to myself that it was a weird way to proclaim that someone was uninterested in partaking in a specific practice. I did not understand the rationale behind the advertisements—only that they were weird and seemed out of place to me.

As I reached adulthood, I found out that my beloved boots that I wore with every outfit were made out of leather. I was uneducated on what these materials consisted of, but I was completely devastated when I found out. I remember crying my eyes out when I realized how my boots were created. This led me down a rabbit hole (no pun intended) of discovering which clothing materials were animal-sourced, and which ones were man-made. I then began to understand why celebrities were posing in those advertisements in the nude.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Manipulation and narrow the range of feelings; Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness; Your thoughts, feelings, actions are irrelevant or selfish

Reflection and Analysis

PETA's campaigns frequently leverage extreme emotional reactions to narrow the spectrum of acceptable feelings toward animal welfare. For instance, the organization's controversial 2003 traveling exhibit, "The Holocaust on Your Plate," juxtaposed graphic images of Holocaust victims with those of animals suffering in factory farms (Cantens, 2024). This comparison not only elicited moral shock but also forced audiences to align their emotional responses to animal suffering with those reserved for human atrocities. By equating the experiences of animals and Holocaust victims, PETA attempted to eliminate any middle ground, coercing individuals to adopt a rigid, emotionally charged perspective on animal rights.

Similarly, PETA's December 2004 billboard featuring the provocative question "Did Your Sweater Cause a Bloody Butt? Boycott Australian Wool!" (Bromberg, 2021) created a visceral

association between wearing wool and causing violence. This approach leaves little room for nuanced thought or consideration of alternatives, narrowing feelings to guilt or outrage.

PETA's tactics are deeply rooted in cultivating guilt as a motivator for action. The organization's relentless pressure campaigns and controversial public relations stunts are designed to make individuals feel personally culpable for animal suffering. For example, their long-running "I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur" campaign featured celebrities posing nude to emphasize the ethical choice of rejecting fur (Murphy, 2024). This campaign not only normalized the idea that wearing fur is morally reprehensible but also insinuated that those who wear it are complicit in cruelty. Such messaging fosters feelings of unworthiness, as individuals are made to feel that their consumer choices are not only wrong but fundamentally immoral.

PETA's efforts to manipulate guilt extend beyond consumers to target broader societal norms. Their undercover investigations and graphic depictions of animal suffering emphasize systemic exploitation and violence (Cantens, 2024). By highlighting these injustices, PETA positions its audience as either complicit in or ignorant of the atrocities, compelling them to adopt PETA's perspective to alleviate their guilt.

A core element of PETA's strategy is to frame individual thoughts, feelings, and actions as irrelevant or selfish unless they align with the organization's agenda. The group's mission to represent nonhuman animals as an oppressed group deserving solidarity, respect, and reparation underscores this tactic (Fernández, 2021). By framing animal rights as a moral imperative akin to human rights, PETA implies that any deviation from their perspective is inherently selfish or morally deficient.

For instance, the graphic and emotionally charged imagery in campaigns such as "The

Holocaust on Your Plate" and the "Boycott Australian Wool" billboard forces audiences to

prioritize the plight of animals over their own emotional comfort or ethical reasoning. PETA's

insistence on drawing parallels between human and animal suffering invalidates any

counterarguments that do not place animal rights at the forefront of ethical considerations.

PETA's use of emotional control through the BITE Model demonstrates their

effectiveness in mobilizing support but also reveals the ethical complexities of their approach.

Their reliance on moral shock, guilt, and emotional manipulation often limits constructive

dialogue and alienates potential allies who may not fully align with their methods. As Fernández

(2021) suggests, alternative and complementary approaches are needed to represent nonhuman

animals in ways that foster solidarity and respect without resorting to manipulative tactics. While

PETA's strategies have undeniably shaped the animal rights movement, their use of emotional

control raises important questions about the balance between effective advocacy and ethical

persuasion.

We Are NOT Family!

There was a banner of various staff members on the wall, designed to emulate the family

portrait in squares that was at the end of the theme song of the iconic sitcom *The Brady Bunch*.

Why? My boss claimed that our colleagues were our "work family" and that we should treat each

other as such. This mentality was engrained into our minds, and this mentality was also present

throughout our interactions with each other. I recall seeing my boss place herself in screaming

matches with staff members over disagreements. These interactions were more resembling of

bickering siblings or cousins, not those of a professional work setting. They always made up and

continued in the workplace as if nothing ever changed between them, similar to an unconditional family bond that refused to cease.

A common thread that I have seen throughout my teaching career is the hidden contract that all of my co-workers must be treated as my friends and family. I made the mistake several times of trusting people who were against my best interests, even when they convinced me that they were kindhearted human beings. I did learn from my failures with these people, and I have learned that I do not have to befriend every person that I meet—especially at the workplace!

There are a few people who I have worked with that I still remain in contact with as friends. However, I remain guarded and private at work as much as I can. I unfortunately found out time and time again that just because I work with someone in a capacity such as teaching, that it does not mean that the person deserves to be entangled with my own personal business.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control; Thought Control; Emotional Control

Characteristic(s)

Phobia indoctrination by insulating irrational fears about leaving the group or questioning authority by promoting no happiness or fulfillment possible outside of group

Reflection and Analysis

The educational system often employs familial metaphors to cultivate a sense of loyalty, belonging, and emotional attachment among teachers and students. Schools frame themselves as extensions of the family, strategically using this narrative to create environments where individuals feel obligated to serve and conform. This process begins with school leadership and permeates into classrooms, where teachers replicate the same patterns of emotional

reinforcement with their students. When analyzed through the lens of the BITE Model, it becomes clear how these familial structures can be used to manipulate and control individuals within the educational system.

As Michael J. Bader argues, "Patriotic symbols such as the 'nation'—including its manifestations in images like the flag or the Founding Fathers—represent the fulfillment for our longings for connectedness and safety. In this sense, the nation is a metaphor for a family. Families serve the function of providing psychic security and attachment. We project onto ever-expanding forms of social authority the longings originally satisfied by parents in childhood" (Westheimer, 2007, p. 39). Similarly, the school system mirrors this projection. Just as the nation symbolically acts as a family to foster unity and obedience, schools adopt familial language and symbols to evoke a sense of emotional security and duty. Teachers are referred to as members of the "school family," and the expectation is that they prioritize the well-being of the collective over their own individual needs or grievances.

This aligns closely with Emotional Control within the BITE Model. By framing schools as families, the system manipulates emotions to generate guilt, loyalty, and fear. Teachers are conditioned to feel shame if they challenge leadership or place personal needs over the "school family," fostering a sense of dependency and self-sacrifice. Similarly, students are made to feel guilty for nonconformity or underperformance, equating their success in school with acceptance and love within this constructed family unit.

School leaders often reinforce these familial roles, positioning themselves as parental figures within the institutional hierarchy. According to Khumalo (2019), "One of the critical responsibilities of school leadership is to act as the father figure to his or her subordinates and to

ensure that an enabling environment is created where members of the organization and teachers

specifically feel that they are part of the school family and are productive" (p. 547). The

leadership's role as "father figures" creates a system of authority rooted in emotional dependence.

This dynamic encourages teachers to internalize the belief that their dedication to the school

mirrors familial loyalty—a duty that is self-sacrificing and rarely questioned. This reflects the

Thought Control aspect of the BITE Model, where teachers are encouraged to adopt a belief

system that equates obedience and conformity with morality and loyalty.

This manufactured sense of family is not confined to the leadership-teacher relationship; it

also extends into classrooms. Teachers pass this sentiment along to their students, positioning

themselves as nurturing parental figures within the microcosm of the classroom. Terms like

"classroom family" and "school family" are used to foster bonds and compliance, framing the

school as a safe, intimate space. While this can create emotional connections, it also creates a

dynamic where students feel guilt or shame for resisting the school's expectations. Just as a child

might fear disappointing their parents, students come to fear disappointing their teachers, their

"school family," and the system as a whole.

This form of control extends further into Behavior Control. By instilling a sense of familial

loyalty, schools encourage teachers and students to act in ways that prioritize the institution's

goals. Teachers may work unpaid overtime, sacrifice personal time, or ignore professional

boundaries because they are made to feel that such behaviors demonstrate loyalty to the school

family. Similarly, students may overcommit to their extracurricular activities or their academic

performance, believing that their value within the school "family" is contingent upon their amount of contributions.

By equating schools with families, the system manipulates emotional ties to establish control. Teachers and students alike internalize the expectation that their loyalty to the "family" outweighs their personal needs, critiques, or boundaries. This sense of familial belonging can mask structural inequalities and prevent individuals from questioning the system, as dissent is framed as betrayal—an emotional manipulation that aligns with the Information Control of the BITE Model. Dissenting voices are often silenced through shame or guilt, ensuring that information critical of the school system remains marginalized.

Ultimately, the emotional attachment fostered by these metaphors serves as a powerful tool to maintain compliance, productivity, and a sense of duty within the educational system. Through the BITE Model, it becomes evident how this familial framing exerts a subtle yet profound form of control, one that discourages resistance, suppresses dissent, and perpetuates unquestioning loyalty to the institutional structure.

From Soggy Soy to Meatless Meat

I did not establish my vegetarianism or veganism until undergraduate and graduate school respectively. However, I was quite aware of the fact that I wanted to completely cut out meat and dairy from my life. I saw the options in the cafeteria as a student, and felt limited. I did not want to eat the meat-centric meals every day, so I asked my mother if I could start bringing my lunch to school. My mother would not commit to buying me vegetarian items such as Boca burgers and soy milk; in hindsight, they were underdeveloped and low quality compared to today's variety of vegan choices. I had tried the Boca burgers and they always turned out soggy, soft, and flat. The

soy milk had a flavor of plastic. I felt locked in when it came to being a carnivore due to the lack of choices that actually tasted good. Eventually, I did just give up on the idea for awhile and caved into eating carnivore foods—only the school-provided foods on occasion.

Therefore, I started bringing my own lunches to schools—turkey sandwiches mostly with a side of chips. It wasn't too fancy, but it seemed to be a better choice than the choices that the school provided. I would also switch it up and bring a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I became vegetarian when I was in college, but I wanted to totally omit any animal products and animal by-products. I had just found it impossible to do so, because vegan options like milk alternatives and meat alternatives were not consistent availabilities in my college, unless they were accidentally vegan. For an easier social life, I stuck to eating vegetarian because it was easier to order a veggie burger (that had egg in it) than to try to reinvent the wheel.

As I started my job shadowing practices for my undergraduate degree, I noticed how much teachers were given food. I remember that I was given pepperoni pizza after parent-teacher conferences. I secretly took the pepperoni off of the pizza and placed the toppings into the trash. I then ate the cheese, the crust and the sauce quickly before anyone could notice. I did not want to risk having to be asked twenty questions about my food choices.

Before I started working in the public school domain, I officially became vegan. I went cold turkey (pun intended) when I had my wisdom teeth removed. I had purchased vegan ice cream beforehand and so that made the switch easier than it would be for most people. A month later, I broke my leg. I was able to ask for simple vegan meals such as a Boca chick'n patty or a veggie bowl from Chipotle since I could not readily stand up and cook my own food.

When I started teaching in the public school, my students were so fascinated with what I consumed on a daily basis. My students would always ask me what things in my breakfast and lunch were vegan. They considered it to be like a trivia challenge that they wanted to know the answers to. One time, I had a student sneak into my room and steal vegan cheese from my mini-fridge. I had wondered why they just didn't ask to try it if they would so interested in trying it.

When I switched employers, the curiosities of my students were piqued when they saw what I had for lunch. They wanted to smell what I had brought for lunch that day or even try it. I unfortunately did not bring enough to share with multiple students. However, one time I did allow students to try my orange tofu.

It took two years at that teaching position for the administration to ask me what I would eat from various establishments. They used to order in pizza from the local pizza place that had an extensive vegan menu for everyone, and I made it quite known that I followed a vegan lifestyle. I made a joke about being excluded to the assistant principal, and within an hour I was asked what I would like to eat from the establishment. From that point on, I would receive a fully loaded vegan pizza for myself from that vegan menu whenever they ordered food from there for the staff. They even switched it up once and had a nacho bar with vegan options.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control

Characteristic(s)

Regulate diet, impose rigid rules and regulations; instill dependency and obedience; require members to internalize group's doctrine as truth, instill black and white thinking, decide

against/between good v. Evil, change person's identity, use of loaded language and cliches, promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness, phobia indoctrination

Reflection and Analysis

Everyone's journey with veganism is unique, shaped by personal beliefs, cultural influences, and societal perceptions. My experience, however, has often been aligned with what mainstream culture has historically labeled as "weird" or "inconvenient." This perception largely stems from a lack of widespread knowledge and understanding of the lifestyle. In the past, dining out was a challenge, as many restaurants and food establishments were unfamiliar with the concept of veganism. I recall instances where restaurant staff were unsure of what the term "vegan" meant, let alone how to prepare meals that adhered to its standards. The absence of accommodations or awareness often made veganism feel like an uphill battle against deeply ingrained food norms and expectations.

Even beyond the dining experience, veganism often invites scrutiny, dismissal, or even hostility from those who view it as an extreme or unnecessary stance. Social gatherings can feel isolating when the mere act of declining a meal garners frustration or confusion. Family traditions, which are often centered around food, require careful navigation when one's ethical commitments clash with long-standing cultural practices. In many ways, being vegan is not just a dietary choice but a constant exercise in advocacy—whether through explaining one's beliefs, requesting alternatives, or confronting the subtle yet persistent resistance from a world that prioritizes convenience and tradition over ethical consideration.

This struggle is further reflected in the larger structures that uphold the exploitation of animals. As Cochrane and Cojocaru (2023) argue, it is not simply individual acts of cruelty that

sustain animal oppression, but rather corporate, political, economic, and social systems that enable and reinforce it. The factory farming industry, for example, thrives on policies that protect corporate interests over environmental sustainability or animal welfare. Government subsidies for meat and dairy industries continue to shape consumer behavior and food accessibility, making plant-based alternatives less available or more expensive in comparison. Meanwhile, marketing campaigns reinforce the normalization of consuming animal products, often masking the realities of production behind pastoral imagery and deceptive labeling.

Despite our personal choices, we remain entangled in these oppressive structures, making it clear that the fight against animal exploitation is not just a matter of personal ethics but a broader political and social justice issue. Veganism, then, is not simply about personal purity or individual consumption but about dismantling systemic violence. It challenges the deeply entrenched hierarchies that commodify sentient beings and, by extension, intersect with other forms of oppression, including labor exploitation, environmental degradation, and the inequities of food distribution. To be vegan is, in many ways, to remain in constant negotiation with a world that resists change, yet therein lies its power: the potential to disrupt the status quo and reimagine a more compassionate, just, and sustainable future.

The Sky's The Limit

We recently embarked on a new adventure—homeschooling our daughter.

She was attending kindergarten at the local elementary school, but she reported that she was bored within the first few months. When she tried to help others, she said that she would get in trouble with the teacher for telling others what to do. Other times, she said that the teacher would ask her to help her classmates because she already understood the material twofold. When

she woke up in the mornings, she begged for us to keep her at home. She said that she would love to learn from home, but did not want to have to attempt to tolerate her chaotic and loud classmates. She started to dread going on the bus because of the other children, so we started providing the transportation to and from school.

We started to look for homeschool options, and my wife happened to stumble upon a state-affiliated virtual program that was accepting applications for students. We registered our daughter for the program, and all the pieces fell into place for her to transition to homeschool. We told the school that we wished to enroll her in the program.

We then sat in parent-teacher conferences, with an intervention-like circle surrounding us as we explained that we wanted to switch our daughter to homeschool. The counselors and teachers glared at us as if we had multiple heads. They begged us to keep her enrolled at the school, and hinted at her above grade level test scores as their rationale behind why they wanted her to stay in school there. We politely told them that this was what we had decided to do, and then we took the proper steps to unenroll her from the school into the virtual program.

She is thriving in homeschool, and absolutely adores her schedule. She started the first grade through the virtual program last fall, and still loves the set-up of her days.

I am aware of how privileged we are, because a majority of parents and guardians cannot afford to have their young children homeschooled, even via a computer screen. We supplement her work ourselves, which is absolutely another privilege within itself. This journey has been rewarding for all of us, without the constant battles that are engaged in the public school.

BITE Model Tenet(s)

Behavior Control; Information Control; Thought Control

Characteristic(s)

Permission required for major decisions; Discourage individualism, encourage group-think; Impose rigid rules and regulations; Instill dependency and obedience; Deception; Distort information to make it more acceptable; Impose a buddy system to monitor and control member; Report deviant thoughts, feelings and actions to leadership; Ensure that individual behavior is monitored by group; Require members to internalize the group's doctrine as truth; Adopting the group's 'map of reality' as reality; Instill black and white thinking; Decide between good vs. evil; Organize people into us vs. them (insiders vs. outsiders)

Reflection and Analysis

Homeschooling—nor the reactions presented from the mere thought of homeschooling—is not a new avenue to educate children. "The homeschooling movement has quietly grown to a size where one and half million young people are being educated entirely by their own parents; [it was] reported [that,] in their ability to think, children schooled at home seem to be five or even ten years ahead of their formally trained peers" (Gatto, 2017, p. 22). This observation not only highlights the potential academic benefits of homeschooling but also suggests that the traditional schooling system may intentionally limit the intellectual autonomy of students. By fostering conformity through standardized curricula and rigid structures, public education often prioritizes obedience and uniformity over independent thought—a subtle form of behavior control.

The critique of homeschooling as a practice that causes "social isolation" is emblematic of deeper societal concerns about deviating from institutional norms. While many opponents claim homeschooling hinders social skill development, this argument can be interpreted as a

mechanism to reinforce societal control. Public education systems are structured to socialize children into specific roles within the broader society, instilling behaviors and ideologies that align with state and cultural expectations. Homeschooling, in contrast, disrupts this process, as it allows parents to prioritize alternative values, critical thinking, or religious and cultural beliefs that may challenge mainstream narratives.

The claim that homeschooling is "potentially dangerous for democratic societies" because it involves opting out of public education (Dill & Elliot, 2019, p. 264) further illustrates the tension between individual autonomy and societal control. Public education is often seen as a cornerstone of democracy because it creates a shared cultural and ideological foundation, ensuring that citizens are "properly" socialized to participate in democratic processes. However, this uniformity can also serve as a form of behavior control, discouraging dissent and homogenizing perspectives to maintain the status quo. By homeschooling, families assert their right to educate children outside this framework, challenging the government's monopoly on shaping future generations.

Homeschool families' ability to "acquire cultural capital through participation in activities outside of formal instructional time" (Hamlin, 2019, p. 312) underscores the potential of homeschooling to foster diverse, self-directed growth. This ability to bypass traditional educational frameworks represents a significant shift in power dynamics. It enables families to reject state-sanctioned narratives and create individualized paths for their children, emphasizing skills and values that align with their unique worldviews. Such autonomy undermines the state's ability to enforce a singular definition of success or acceptable behavior, further challenging institutional control.

The historical context of homeschooling's legalization provides additional insight into the government's role in regulating educational autonomy. "In 1980, home schooling was illegal in 30 states. It has only been legal in all 50 states since 1993. However, specific state laws constitute a patchwork of regulations" (Basham et al., 2007, p. 7). This patchwork reflects ongoing efforts by the government to maintain oversight and control over nontraditional education, despite the growing demand for homeschooling. The initial illegality of homeschooling in many states reveals an inherent resistance to alternative educational models that operate outside state control. Even as homeschooling became legal, regulations have often been used to monitor and limit the extent of parental autonomy, ensuring that families remain tethered, at least in part, to government-imposed standards.

In essence, the debate over homeschooling extends beyond academic and social outcomes to encompass broader issues of control and autonomy. Public education functions as a tool for shaping citizens who conform to societal norms and expectations, reinforcing behaviors deemed beneficial to the state. Homeschooling, by its very nature, challenges this system, empowering families to diverge from mainstream ideologies and practices. The resistance to homeschooling, therefore, can be understood as a reaction to the threat it poses to the state's ability to regulate behavior and maintain control over the cultural and intellectual development of its citizens.

Findings and Themes

The analysis of the data revealed several prominent themes, which are discussed below, as they relate to the BITE model and the research questions:

1. **Authoritarian Structures in Education**

   A recurring theme across my journal entries was the rigidity and top-down control

that characterized many educational environments. This was particularly evident

in the hierarchical relationship between teachers and administrators, where

teacher autonomy was often undermined by micromanagement. Teachers were

expected to comply with standardized curricula and teaching methods, with little

room for creativity or individual expression. This pattern strongly resembled the

"Behavior Control" component of the BITE model, where there is a systematic

enforcement of conformity.

2.   **Emotional and Information Control in Education**

Another theme that emerged was the use of guilt and fear to maintain control over

teachers and students. Teachers who deviated from the prescribed norms were

often penalized or labeled as ineffective, while students were conditioned to

accept rigid structures and authority figures without question. This emotional

manipulation aligned with the "Emotional Control" and "Information Control"

components of the BITE model, where access to alternative viewpoints was

restricted and individuals were made to feel guilty for questioning institutional

norms.

3.   **Cult-Like Practices within the Vegan Movement**

In the vegan movement, a similar pattern emerged, with certain groups enforcing a

"purity" standard that discouraged deviation from strict dietary rules. Social exclusion

and shaming were common tactics used to ensure adherence, mirroring both Thought

and Emotional Control. The pressure to conform, coupled with the guilt that often

followed any form of deviation (such as consuming non-vegan food or using non-

vegan products), demonstrated a striking resemblance to the authoritarian tactics observed in cultic groups.

4.   **Critical "Deprogramming" of Educational Norms**

The final theme that emerged from my reflections was the need for critical "deprogramming" within both the educational system and the vegan movement. This theme explored how individuals can reclaim autonomy by recognizing and resisting the indoctrination processes inherent in these systems. By critically analyzing the ways in which both education and veganism employ cult-like tactics, I developed strategies for promoting greater self-awareness and encouraging others to question and resist harmful societal norms.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the process of data generation, coding, and analysis, as well as the significant themes that emerged from my autoethnographic reflections. Through a careful examination of my personal experiences, I identified key patterns and relationships that demonstrated how authoritarian practices within education and the vegan movement reflect elements of cultic behavior. The findings underscore the importance of fostering critical thinking and self-awareness in order to break free from these oppressive structures and create spaces for greater autonomy and choice. In the following chapter, I will explore these themes further and discuss their implications for educational reform and personal growth within the vegan community.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter serves to further illuminate the clear links between the preceding chapters and the findings, creating a cohesive narrative that underscores the broader implications of this research. Additionally, it offers my extended reflections on the lessons learned from conducting this study and how they contribute to the future of educational practice, the vegan movement, and social change at large.

This study explored the ways in which both schooling and the vegan movement exhibit authoritarian characteristics that align with documented aspects of cultic groups, as defined by Hassan's BITE Model. By examining the research questions, I identified key elements within these systems that reflect varying degrees of Behavioral, Informational, Thought, and Emotional control.

In schooling, numerous authoritarian elements emerged, particularly in rigid hierarchical structures, unquestioned obedience to authority figures, and the suppression of critical thought through standardized curricula and punitive discipline. These align closely with the BITE Model, especially in behavioral and informational control. However, the model fell short in fully encapsulating the complexity of systemic conditioning within education, as coercion in schools often functions more subtly and under the guise of societal necessity rather than overt ideological manipulation.

Similarly, within the vegan movement, aspects of thought and emotional control were evident, particularly in moral absolutism, social pressure, and in-group versus out-group dynamics. While the BITE Model provided a useful framework for analyzing these traits, it did not entirely account for the ways in which ethical movements differ from high-control groups in

their decentralized structures and voluntary participation. Unlike in traditional cultic settings, individuals within the vegan movement retain greater autonomy in disengaging. Ultimately, this study has reinforced the need for intentional "deprogramming" within my own work and life. Identifying these authoritarian patterns creates opportunities to challenge normalized structures, fostering greater agency and critical thinking in both education and ethical advocacy. By recognizing the mechanisms of control, I can work toward creating educational spaces that prioritize autonomy, open inquiry, and the dismantling of coercive norms.

When I embarked on this project, I held a strong belief that the educational system operates as a for-profit business with a cultic-group design. While this perspective may seem biased, the results of this research provide substantial evidence supporting the accuracy of my initial hypothesis. By examining the educational system through the lens of Dr. Hassan's BITE Model and conducting additional research, I identified numerous elements within the system that align closely with the characteristics of cultic groups. These findings have profound implications for how we understand the function and impact of education on individuals and society.

The limitations of this study warrant discussion, as they provide important context for interpreting the findings. One significant limitation is the variability of individual experiences within the educational system. While the findings reflect a certain pattern of cultic characteristics, they may not encapsulate the experiences of all teachers or students. For some educators, their participation in the system may have been overwhelmingly positive—an experience that has been celebrated with growth, inspiration, and fulfillment. These contrasting narratives highlight the complexity of the system and the diversity of individual perspectives.

The methodology employed in this study not only facilitated the exploration of my research questions but also provided profound personal insights. Through the process of conducting this research, I became acutely aware of my own role within the educational system. As both a student and a teacher, I have, at times, unknowingly perpetuated the cultic aspects of the system that I have sought to critique. This realization has been both humbling and enlightening, as it underscores the pervasive and insidious nature of these dynamics.

As a self-identified change agent, this study has enabled me to recognize the ways in which the educational system embodies cultic characteristics. Through analysis of policies, practices, and cultural norms, I identified an array of elements that reflect heightened alignment with Dr. Hassan's BITE Model. These include behavior control, information control, thought control, and emotional control, all of which are deeply embedded in the structure and operation of the system. Examples range from the rigid standardization of curricula to the enforcement of compliance through rewards and punishments, and the suppression of dissenting voices.

In conclusion, this chapter serves as a critical reflection on the journey of this research, the insights gained, and their impact on myself and the world. By acknowledging the limitations, embracing the personal revelations, and situating the findings within a larger context of social change, this discussion offers a roadmap for future inquiry and action for deprogramming the system. It is my hope that this work inspires educators, activists, and policymakers to critically examine the systems they operate within and to strive for a more equitable, compassionate, and liberated world for ourselves and for our surroundings.

Interpretation of Findings

The education system today exhibits several elements that can be identified as authoritarian, resembling aspects of cultic groups as defined by Steven Hassan's BITE model (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional control). In schooling, strict behavioral regulations, such as rigid schedules, enforced obedience, and punitive measures for nonconformity, reflect behavioral control. Information control is evident in the selective dissemination of knowledge, often prioritizing curricula that align with dominant ideologies while excluding alternative perspectives. Thought control is reinforced through an emphasis on rote memorization and discouragement of critical thinking that challenges institutional norms. Emotional control manifests in the cultivation of guilt or fear, such as fear of failure or punishment, to maintain compliance. These elements collectively sustain a culture that prioritizes conformity over individuality and discourages questioning of the system's authority, drawing parallels to the methods employed by cultic groups to maintain control over members.

The vegan movement, despite its noble goals of promoting animal rights and environmental sustainability, also exhibits some characteristics that resemble cultic tendencies as described in Hassan's BITE model. Behavioral control can be seen in the promotion of strict adherence to vegan principles, often accompanied by social pressure or shaming for non-compliance. Information control might involve limiting exposure to scientific debates on alternative dietary approaches or the nuanced realities of food systems. Thought control can emerge in the form of dogmatic thinking, where dissenting perspectives are dismissed outright. Emotional control may involve the use of guilt or shame to influence dietary choices, leveraging emotional appeals about animal suffering or environmental degradation to enforce conformity.

While these characteristics do not define the movement as inherently cultic, they highlight patterns that could suppress individual autonomy in favor of group cohesion.

Through this study, I learned to create greater space for critical "deprogramming" of normalized educational procedures by developing a deeper understanding of how systems perpetuate conformity and suppress critical thought. By analyzing the parallels between schooling practices and cult-like dynamics through Hassan's BITE model, I became more attuned to the subtle ways in which control is exerted over behavior, information, thought, and emotions within educational institutions. This awareness enabled me to recognize and question the entrenched rituals and structures that limit individuality and discourage dissent. As a result, I began to intentionally cultivate spaces that prioritize open dialogue, encourage questioning of authority, and celebrate diverse perspectives. I learned to frame critical thinking not as a disruption to order but as a vital component of learning and growth. This shift extended beyond the classroom into my personal and professional life, inspiring me to approach other areas—such as social advocacy or community involvement—with the same commitment to fostering autonomy, inclusivity, and intellectual freedom. By challenging these normalized practices, I gained the tools to not only advocate for systemic change but also embody those changes in how I interact with others and design transformative learning experiences.

My findings indicate that the United States educational system aligns more closely with the characteristics of a cult-like group than it diverges from them. Through the lens of Hassan's BITE model, this system exemplifies behavioral, informational, thought, and emotional control, perpetuated by a political agenda that wields significant influence over the system's structure and outcomes. Although the United States is portrayed as a democracy that stands against global

evils, the educational system's origins and current practices reflect a history of oppression, particularly of non-white populations. These practices are deeply tied to profit-driven motives, echoing Gatto's (2017) assertion that American schooling "doesn't teach the way children learn" but rather serves a concealed economy and social hierarchy (p. 107). This dynamic positions the system not as an equitable institution but as a mechanism for maintaining economic stratification, where those who fail to align with its standards are relegated to poverty or living paycheck to paycheck.

In my experiences, there have been many parts of the BITE Model that I did not determine an association with the educational system. There are several aspects of the model that range on the extreme level that did not correlate with the study: Punish disobedience by beating, torture, burning, cutting, rape, or tattooing/branding; Force individual to rape or be raped; kidnapping; beating; torture; rape; separation of families; imprisonment; and murder. There have been instances that have occurred that were isolated events, but those were not studied. There have been many school shootings throughout the last decades, but unfortunately mass violence is not a unique characteristic of the educational system nor have I experienced those types of cruelties. Therefore, those parts of the BITE Model do not apply to the research questions nor to any relevant argument about the educational system.

The argument that dismantling the Department of Education and transferring power to individual states could address systemic flaws, as suggested by some (Lyerly, 2025), fails to address the root causes of these issues. A complete upheaval of the system is indeed necessary but must go beyond decentralization. Deprogramming the educational system requires a reimagining of its purpose and methods, dismantling the profit-driven motives and oppressive

structures that sustain it. Loewen (2018) emphasizes that "history distorts our understanding of society" (p. 2), highlighting the ways in which overtly designed deficiencies of our educational curricula can propagate narratives that suppress critical examination of systemic failures. By controlling the content of education, the system enforces conformity and inhibits the development of informed, critical citizens capable of challenging the status quo.

The parallels between the educational system and a profit-driven business model are striking. Students are conditioned through school experiences to internalize inadequacy and compliance, as Gatto (2017) notes, creating a populace that is more easily managed and less likely to disrupt the established order. This conditioning extends to a broader societal level, where even attempts to innovate outside traditional frameworks are met with resistance or outright suppression, such as the potential ban on platforms like TikTok. These mechanisms demonstrate how deeply ingrained systems work to protect existing power dynamics by controlling access to alternative avenues of success.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for a critical reckoning with the educational system's purpose and practices. Loewen (2018) argues that "our civic discourse has become polarized" due to the educational system's failure to present credible and creditable histories (p. 110). The system's deliberate omissions and distortions prevent the cultivation of a shared understanding necessary for progress. As Gatto (2017) reflects, schooling functions to "denature" individuals, reshaping them to fit predetermined societal molds (p. 187). Recognizing these mechanisms is the first step toward creating space for critical "deprogramming," fostering environments where diverse perspectives and genuine inquiry can thrive. This study reveals that

addressing these challenges requires not just incremental reform but a fundamental shift in how education is conceptualized and implemented.

The government's desire to maintain this structure is evident in the way the education system operates today, intentionally omitting accurate history, creating carbon copies of students, and reinforcing a rigid social class contract. By relying on standardized tests that promote rote memorization and teaching to the test, the system stifles creative thinking and discourages the exercise of critical thought. This manipulation of educational practice functions to prevent citizens from exercising their right to protest and demand change, ultimately maintaining the status quo. This approach becomes a form of indoctrination that leans towards right-wing conservative ideals, limiting opportunities for those who are not white and wealthy to challenge the system or achieve more fulfilling lives.

Research demonstrates that the educational system often functions as an apparatus of indoctrination, reinforcing dominant ideologies and limiting the capacity for critical thinking among students. Deprogramming this indoctrination is essential for fostering engaged, informed citizens. Loewen (2018) highlights how failures in teaching credible and inclusive histories contribute to societal polarization: "Citizens are reasonably united when they share a history that they believe is both credible and creditable" (p. 110). However, many educational practices distort history, creating narratives that prioritize nationalism over accuracy. According to Loewen, "some people, including some school administrators, think lying to schoolchildren is in the nation's best interest. If we 'dwell on' the bad things that we have done in the past, they imagine, then children will grow up to hate the United States, and we shall fall apart as a nation" (2018, p. 15). Such practices do not foster unity but instead perpetuate ignorance and division.

Moreover, the reluctance to critically engage with the nation's historical and political realities serves to uphold systems of oppression. Loewen (2018) observes that "some rightists may not want schools 'to dwell' on how the United States almost invariably winds up supporting dictatorships" (p. 16). This selective presentation of history denies students the opportunity to grapple with complex truths, leaving them ill-prepared to address societal challenges or advocate for equity and justice.

Practical Applications

The practical implications of this study are vast, extending beyond the educational system and into the very fabric of societal structures that govern daily life. As of this writing, Donald Trump has swiftly dismantled numerous protections and freedoms guaranteed by previous administrations, including key diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) provisions designed to foster fair and just educational environments. Within his first week in office, he has not only rescinded these hard-won rights but has also actively threatened to withhold federal funding from schools that engage in what he deems "discriminatory equity ideology" (Schermele, 2025). These threats, aimed directly at the Department of Education, signal a broader, more insidious agenda—one that seeks to control the narrative of education and, by extension, the ideological foundation upon which future generations will be raised. His actions illustrate a stark reality: the power he wields operates with few, if any, meaningful checks, making it alarmingly easy for policies rooted in fear, division, and exclusion to become the norm rather than the exception.

At the intersection of my identity as a student, teacher, researcher, scholar, mother, lesbian, and woman, I strive to maintain an optimistic spirit—one that clings to faith in a future where justice prevails. However, the findings of this study, alongside the rapidly unfolding political

landscape, have made it painfully clear that the institutions many have placed trust in are neither

neutral nor immune to authoritarian influence. The world as we know it is increasingly

vulnerable to the whims of a spokesperson for an oppressive regime, a leader who weaponizes

his authority to reshape reality under the guise of restoring order. The repercussions of this

administration's actions are profound and far-reaching, ensuring that the ripple effects will be felt

long after the policies themselves have been enacted.

As my research explores the cultic tendencies embedded within the US education system, it

becomes increasingly evident that these elements are not just lingering undercurrents but actively

expanding in scope and intensity. Indoctrination, loyalty tests, and ideological rigidity—once

considered characteristics of fringe extremist groups—are now being woven into the very

foundation of mainstream education policy. The trend is deeply troubling, and if history has

taught us anything, it is that such systems tend to deteriorate further before meaningful change

emerges. I fear that the cult-like elements within the United States educational system will only

grow more pronounced before any glimmer of hope manages to break through the darkness. Yet,

even in the face of this reality, resistance is not futile. It is through critical scholarship, collective

action, and an unrelenting commitment to truth that the cycle can be disrupted. Whether that

disruption comes sooner or later depends entirely on those willing to challenge the status quo

before it solidifies into something far more dangerous.

The practical implications of this study also extend to the vegan movement—which like

the education system, is not immune to ideological control, misinformation, and corporate

influence. The rise of authoritarian rhetoric that seeks to suppress DEI initiatives and reshape

education also threatens movements advocating for ethical and sustainable living. Historically,

plant-based advocacy has been dismissed as radical or un-American, particularly when it challenges dominant industries such as factory farming and industrial agriculture—both of which are deeply intertwined with government subsidies and corporate interests. If education becomes increasingly controlled by authoritarian forces, there is a high likelihood that science-based discussions on climate change, animal rights, and plant-based nutrition will be censored or distorted to align with capitalist and nationalist agendas. This suppression not only impacts public understanding of the benefits of veganism but also reinforces the systemic exploitation of marginalized communities, animals, and the environment. The cult-like elements in education, if left unchecked, could contribute to further ideological rigidity, where the pursuit of truth and ethical progress—cornerstones of the vegan movement—are stifled in favor of narratives that serve political and economic power.

Implications for Practice and Social Change

The findings of this study have far-reaching implications beyond the realm of education. They intersect with broader movements for social change—such as the vegan movement—by highlighting the systemic patterns of control and conformity that hinder progress. By drawing parallels between the mechanisms of the educational system and those observed in other societal structures, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how to dismantle oppressive systems and foster transformative change.

The implications for practice are extremely profound. Educators must embrace critical pedagogy to cultivate spaces where students can question dominant narratives, analyze power dynamics, and envision alternative futures. This transformative approach not only enhances learning outcomes but also empowers students to become active participants in shaping a more

equitable and democratic society. By confronting the systemic indoctrination embedded within education, critical pedagogy offers a pathway to social change, fostering generations of individuals who are informed, empathetic, and committed to justice. It also provides a sense of joy for who are underrepresented in both the curriculum and the world (Childs, 2024; Edwards & Reynolds, 2024).

Critical pedagogy seeks to challenge and disrupt the effects of oppressive power structures both in the classroom and in society at large (Nikolakaki, 2022, p. 320). This theoretical framework provides a lens to examine the ways in which educational systems perpetuate cycles of indoctrination, ultimately maintaining societal inequities and stifling critical consciousness. It is vital to establish and reflect on how the educational system was initially developed in Prussia with the primary aim of teaching citizens skills that would prevent them from revolting against their government (Paglayan, 2022, p. 1246). This historical foundation reveals that education systems were not designed to promote critical thinking or empowerment but to maintain control and prevent social unrest.

Beyond the atmosphere of the educational system, the vegan movement shares many characteristics of a cult-like entity. However, there are more non-vegans than there are vegans, and either side can be seen as cult-like as well. As Young (2022) concludes, "[In] almost every group, organization, or team [lies inherent cult-think and harmful behavior.]; [where does] cult end and a culture begin [and what] is the difference between a good organization and a bad cult? I don't think there is a difference, ultimately" (p. 33). As I have uncovered from my research, every group has the potential to display real parallels to the characteristics recorded in the BITE Model and this may be because of the ongoing structural tendencies towards authoritarianism

and a hidden curriculum of cultural hegemony to which American citizens are enculturated through schooling and their consumer practices.

Recommendations for Action

Through the lens of the BITE model, a majority of systems that are associated with every aspect of human and animal life in the United States (and across the world) can be seen through the lens of a cult-like entity. This includes—but is definitely not limited to—the food that is generated to meet our human need of hunger as well as the educational system that has its roots in the oppression of non-white persons and ties to a model simply designed for organizations to profit from while hindering the progress of the common person.

There are a collective of people who insist that eliminating the Department of Education and transferring those decisions to the individual states will solve the existing problems in the educational system (Lyerly, 2025). However, a complete dismantlement of the system will not fix the issues at hand. A total dismantlement may serve as a bandage, but will not address the problems that the system contains. If these decisions go back to the states, then there will be additional problems that will require additional solutions. Unfortunately, most of the politicians who desire to end the department have never been in the trenches of daily life as a teacher in the public school.

Deprogramming of the educational system will require a complete upheaval of the system, but does not necessarily require a dismissal of the department in its entirety. Education, much like other profit-driven systems, has been manipulated to serve the interests of the powerful at the expense of the marginalized. As Loewen (2018) asserts, "History distorts our understanding of society" (p. 2). The historical foundations of the education system have been

intentionally framed to perpetuate social hierarchies rather than dismantle them. Furthermore, the way individuals are categorized within this system influences behavior, as "Social categorization reduces uncertainty because it renders the self and others relatively predictable and, in the case of self-categorization, prescribes what one should think, feel, and do" (Rast et al., 2016, p. 261). The current system encourages conformity rather than independent thought, which further entrenches cult-like mechanisms of control. As Giroux (2024) contends, "If the civic fabric and the democratic political culture that sustains democracy are to survive, education must once again be linked to matters of social justice, equity, human rights, history, and the public good" (p. xxiv).

While systemic change is necessary, educators also have a role to play in resisting these structures. However, pushing back comes with inherent risks. As Hassan (2020) recommends, educators must "create an atmosphere in [the classroom] that encourages questioning, open discussion, and respect for a wide range of beliefs and opinions" (p. 321). This recommendation, while seemingly simple, is ambiguous in practice due to the pressures placed on educators to conform to standardized curricula and administrative expectations.

To foster critical thinking in students, educators must integrate inquiry-based learning and Socratic questioning to encourage analytical thought. Shifting away from standardized test-driven instruction and focusing on problem-solving and ethical reasoning will empower students to challenge dominant narratives in history and social studies curricula. Hassan (2020) emphasizes the importance of this approach, stating, "Teach students how to think critically and analytically. Rather than teaching to the test, teach young people how to think for themselves. Teach them to look out for others—to be responsible citizens" (p. 321). This perspective

underscores the necessity of cultivating independent thought and social responsibility in education. By prioritizing critical analysis over rote memorization, educators can help students develop the intellectual curiosity and ethical awareness needed to navigate complex societal issues. Encouraging students to question historical narratives, assess multiple perspectives, and engage in meaningful discourse equips them with the skills to become informed, active participants in democracy.

Building a supportive educator network is another crucial step. Establishing educator-led advocacy groups that promote academic freedom and ethical teaching practices will strengthen collective resistance. Developing professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers can share strategies for maintaining autonomy in the classroom will provide ongoing support. Partnering with organizations focused on education reform will amplify collective voices and provide essential resources for change. As hooks (1994) notes, "We learned early on [as students] that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (p. 2). This insight underscores the transformative power of education as a means of resistance. By fostering critical consciousness and intellectual empowerment, educators can challenge oppressive systems that seek to limit academic freedom. Creating spaces where teachers can engage in meaningful discourse, question dominant narratives, and cultivate a pedagogy of liberation is essential for sustaining this resistance. Through collective action and intentional advocacy, educators can reclaim the classroom as a site of empowerment rather than compliance.

Engaging in policy advocacy will further empower educators to challenge oppressive systems and create meaningful change in the classroom and beyond. Encouraging participation

in local and national policy discussions regarding curriculum and assessment standards ensures

that educators have a voice in shaping progressive educational policies that promote equity and

inclusion. Supporting union efforts that protect teacher autonomy is equally vital, as strong

unions safeguard educators' rights, enabling them to teach critical perspectives without fear of

undue repercussions. Stanley (2010) emphasizes that all educators, whether consciously or not,

operate within and respond to the dominant social order. He argues that the persistent social

issues—such as poverty, discrimination, inequality, and the concentration of power—necessitate

an educational approach that critically engages with these realities rather than passively

maintaining the status quo. This underscores the inescapable political nature of education:

teachers either reinforce existing power structures through uncritical pedagogy or actively work

toward social transformation. Understanding this reality allows educators to be intentional about

their impact while also considering how to enact change without inviting significant

governmental pushback.

Practicing ethical resistance within the classroom allows educators to challenge the

restrictive and often inequitable structures of the education system while still working within it.

Ethical resistance involves making pedagogical choices that prioritize students' holistic

development, critical thinking skills, and empowerment rather than simply conforming to rigid

standardized expectations. One way educators can enact this resistance is through alternative

assessment methods that focus on student growth, such as portfolios, project-based learning, and

self-assessments. These approaches value the learning process rather than reducing students to

test scores, which often reflect systemic inequities rather than actual understanding. Additionally,

incorporating projects that encourage civic engagement and social justice awareness equips

students with the tools to critically analyze societal structures and actively participate in meaningful change. This aligns with Henry Giroux's (2024) argument that true reform cannot occur within capitalism's framework because the system itself perpetuates inequality and environmental destruction. His assertion that capitalism cannot be reformed but must be replaced with a sustainable form of democratic socialism suggests that meaningful change requires a complete transformation of economic and political structures. In the context of education, this means that surface-level reforms—such as slightly modifying standardized tests or increasing funding without addressing systemic inequities—are insufficient. Instead, fostering transparent communication with parents and communities helps build collective resistance, ensuring that education serves as a space for liberation rather than compliance. By engaging in these practices, educators contribute to a larger movement that challenges the status quo and advocates for a more just and equitable society.

Educators engaged in resistance must prioritize their self-preservation and mental well-being to sustain their advocacy over the long term. The emotional and physical toll of challenging institutional norms can be significant, making intentional self-care an essential practice rather than a luxury. Strategies such as setting boundaries, engaging in restorative activities, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance can help prevent burnout and sustain resilience. Additionally, seeking mentorship and peer support can provide educators with the guidance and solidarity needed to navigate the complexities of resistance, reinforcing that they are not alone in their efforts.

An essential component of sustainable resistance is recognizing personal limitations and strategically choosing battles. Not every fight needs to be taken on at once, and understanding

when to push forward and when to step back is key to maintaining both professional longevity and effectiveness. Educators must balance their commitment to justice with their own well-being, ensuring that their resistance efforts remain sustainable over time. Noguera and Cohen (2017) emphasize the risks of attempting to remain neutral in times of heightened sociopolitical tension. They note that "when the lines of debate are drawn so starkly, even passive neutrality may give rise to suspicion. Yet educators who prefer to avoid controversy and who would rather remain silent on these polarizing issues may find a stance of neutrality difficult to maintain during these tense times" (p. 27). This highlights the reality that neutrality is often perceived as complicity, particularly in moments of social and political upheaval. Educators who resist injustice may find themselves in difficult positions, but those who attempt to remain neutral may also face scrutiny. This underscores the necessity of thoughtful, strategic action—one that allows educators to advocate for change while preserving their ability to remain effective within their institutions.

Meaningful transformation of the education system requires both structural and pedagogical shifts. While eliminating the Department of Education is not a viable solution, substantial reform is necessary to dismantle the mechanisms of control embedded within the system. Educators play a crucial role in this process by fostering environments that encourage critical thought, civic responsibility, and open dialogue. Through strategic action, policy engagement, and collective support, educators can resist oppressive systems and contribute to a more equitable future.

These actions may be easier said than done, but nothing is ever impossible. However, there currently is a battle for a positive outcome.

Closing Reflections

Each component of the BITE model has great influence on the human mind. Together, they form a totalistic web, one that can be used to manipulate even the most intelligent, creative, ambitious, and strong-willed person (Hassan, 2021, p. 124). This study has fundamentally reshaped my worldview. It is now difficult for me to see any institution as existing outside of the deeply entrenched systems of power, control, and indoctrination. Whether in education, government, or corporate structures, money and power are the driving forces behind their establishment and maintenance. The educational system in the United States, in particular, functions not as a vehicle for liberation but as a means of sustaining existing hierarchies and preserving the interests of the elite.

The power of a specific regime is heightened through its ability to control knowledge. Schools serve as an arm of this control, molding students into compliant participants in a system that does not prioritize their well-being but rather their productivity in service to capitalist structures. To comment on any aspect of the educational system is, by necessity, to critique the political and economic agendas that shape it. As Giroux (2024) argues, "If the civic fabric and the democratic political culture that sustains democracy are to survive, education must once again be linked to matters of social justice, equity, human rights, history, and the public good" (p. xxiv). Yet, the current system actively resists this shift, preferring to maintain an illusion of progress while reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to dismantle.

The United States has shifted into an oligarchy that serves the interests of the wealthy and white elite. Those who inherit whiteness and wealth are exposed to educational opportunities that ensure the continuation of generational privilege. Meanwhile, those who lack these privileges are

denied the tools necessary to disrupt the cycle. The curriculum that students absorb in classrooms is not neutral; it is a carefully curated narrative that prioritizes the maintenance of the existing order. Stanley (2010) affirms this, stating, "Every teacher, whether consciously or not, is working in some relation to the dominant social order. Furthermore, the arguments in favor of education for social transformation continue to direct our attention to persistent social problems (e.g., poverty, discrimination, inequality, and the concentration of power in the hands of dominant groups)" (p. 286). Education, then, is both a battleground and a tool of indoctrination, wielded strategically to reinforce systemic inequities.

Capitalism, as Giroux (2024) states, "cannot be reformed; it is incapable of addressing the major social problems it creates—including massive inequalities in wealth and power and ecological destruction; it must be replaced by a sustainable form of democratic socialism" (p. xxxii). Schools have become sites of corporate encroachment, where students are viewed as future workers rather than critical thinkers. Molnar (2006) notes that "selling in schools has been around for more than a century. It encompasses the use of schools by corporations to sell products or services, promote their points of view or address public relations or political problems" (p. 622). This commodification of education ensures that students are conditioned from an early age to accept consumerism and corporate dominance as inevitable.

Educators, too, face increasing restrictions, often finding themselves unable to speak freely about the realities of systemic oppression. Cooley (2014) warns that "public school teachers now find themselves increasingly being subject to similar restrictions on their abilities to speak inside and outside of the classroom" (p. 238). The introduction of discriminatory censorship laws exacerbates this issue, exposing marginalized students and educators to greater risks. Feingold

and Weishart (2023) highlight the consequences, stating that such laws "expose students and educators to a heightened threat of race- and sex-based harassment, as well as formal sanctions, economic distress, and social ostracization. This threat is most acute for students and educators of color, LGBTQ+ people, and educators who express commitments to equality, censorship, and inclusion" (p. 2). The act of teaching itself has become an act of resistance, as educators must navigate a system that punishes those who seek to empower their students with critical knowledge.

Moreover, there exists a hidden curriculum that dictates which behaviors are valued and which are punished. Free and Križ (2022) describe how "there is a not-so-hidden curriculum at work—a set of assumptions and expectations related to students' and parents' behaviors that some educators value more than others. They rewarded the behaviors they expected and discouraged, stigmatized, and punished other behaviors" (p. 52). This hidden curriculum reinforces racial, economic, and cultural biases, ensuring that students who do not conform to dominant norms face barriers at every turn. The consequences of this conditioning are profound, as Meyer (2013) poignantly describes: "[O]ur schools were depression pits and void of any critical stance on standardized tests and its role in shaping how we viewed intelligence, qualifications, and curriculum" (p. 250). Education, rather than serving as a path to enlightenment, has become a means of control, dictating who succeeds and who is left behind.

As a researcher and as a person, this study has profoundly altered my understanding of the United States and its institutions. I have wrestled with the tension between optimism and cynicism, between the desire for change and the recognition of the system's deep entrenchment. There have been moments when I have faltered in my role as an advocate for transformation,

struggling to envision a path forward. Yet, despite the barriers, I remain committed to the pursuit of knowledge as a tool for democratic resistance.

The future is uncertain, but the possibility for change remains. If there is to be hope, it lies in the acknowledgment that the current system cannot be reformed—it must be fundamentally reimagined through wide-scale participatory inquiry and action. The hegemonic capitalist structures that shape our schools, our government, and our daily lives must be replaced with systems that prioritize equity, sustainability, and genuine liberation. The challenge before us is immense, but so too is the potential for radical democratic transformation.

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APPENDIX: BITE MODEL PERMISSION

Kayla,

I am Dr. Hassan's assistant.

Thank you for reaching out to us. As long as Dr. Hassan is properly cited, then you have permission to use that BITE model image in your dissertation.

Let me know if you have any other questions, and best of luck with your research,

Jim Picariello
Business Operations Manager
Freedom of Mind Resource Center

From: Kayla Gwin
Sent: January 30, 2025, 11:30AM
To: Jim Picariello
Subject: Permissions Request

Dear Dr. Hassan and Freedom of Mind Team,

My name is Kayla Gwin, and I am a doctoral student at Antioch University, pursuing an Ed.D. degree. I am reaching out to request your permission to include a graphic of the BITE Model in my dissertation. In my dissertation, I am analyzing the United States educational system and the vegan movement through the lens of Dr. Hassan's BITE Model. I am using the image (located on the next page) as a supplemental infographic in order to provide a visual representation of the BITE Model for my readers. Upon your permission, I will ensure that the caption will indicate the appropriate copyrights.

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If you are not the rightsholder for this material, please let me know whom I should contact regarding this matter. Thank you for considering my request, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,
Kayla Gwin