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Mythologies of School Reform in Online News Discourses

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by
Nicholas Georgopoulos

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mythologies of School Reform in Online News Discourses

by

Nicholas Georgopoulos

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Associate Professor Thomas M. Philip, Chair

This dissertation examines mainstream online discourses about school reform in the English-speaking world. Based on mythological theories of Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, and V. Propp as well as W. L. Bennett's theory of news, I develop a method for reading mythic structures in news articles: how authors construct crises and lost objects. My findings reveal discourses centered around 1. the mythic figure of the ineffective teacher and its eradication, and 2. the school that can satisfy a student's educational needs (including their need to enter the 21st century job market) and "learning style." In these discourses, the lost objects generate infinite activity for actors through their perpetual failure to achieve these objects. I show how a deliberately crafted myth can offer an alternative to the "bad infinite" dynamics of school choice and Standards and Accountability. My example for this is Sugata Mitra's project, School in the Cloud, a low-cost network of Internet stations in which children around the world teach themselves through the online en-

couragement of educated volunteers. While Mitra and his commentators partake liberally of prevailing discourses of “digital education,” the School in the Cloud cannot be reduced to just another form of it. The underexplored human facilitator (“granny”) reveals novel pedagogical possibilities and challenges, both in the Third World and universally.

In dealing with myths of school choice, ineffective teachers, and the School in the Cloud, my goal is not to debunk the myths or engage with them on the level of their “factuality.” Debunking discourses will merely strengthen the frame of the myth. The point is to make the frame visible, so that we, a collective subject, may select a new frame. I end by outlining how an “endemic” myth can provide a pedagogic *project* for a new American education.

The dissertation of Nicholas Georgopoulos is approved.

Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt

Douglas Kellner

Kenneth Reinhard

Thomas M. Philip, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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Contents

Acknowledgements	v
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	ix
Biographical Sketch	x
1 Introduction	1
2 Theoretical Frameworks and Analytic Method	9
2.1 Mythic narratives	9
2.2 Roland Barthes and the semiology of myth	16
2.3 Depoliticization	21
2.4 Reading Bennett with Barthes	24
2.5 Building a method from the frameworks	30
3 Mythology of School Choice	37
3.1 The myth of needs	38
3.2 The needs of students <i>and</i> society	47
3.3 The infinite curriculum	52
3.4 The calculus of finding the right public school	56
3.5 Choice as privilege and empowerment	61
4 The Ineffective Teacher	66
4.1 Constitution of the myth	67
4.2 Kids not widgets	76
4.3 <i>The Seventy Four</i>	78
4.4 <i>Vergara v. California</i>	85
4.5 The <i>Vergara</i> appeals ruling	88
4.6 The passionate educator	92
4.7 The brilliant eccentric	94
4.8 Myths, hegemony, and suture	100
4.9 Conclusion	103
5 Sugata Mitra's School in the Cloud	105
5.1 Introduction	105
5.2 Historical background	107
5.3 Trajectory of discursive frames	111
5.4 Discussion	120

5.5	The futures of Sole graduates	132
6	Summary of Findings and Connections to Theory and Practice	135
6.1	Second-order significations of school reform	135
6.2	Significance to the field of education research	144
	Bibliography	160

List of Figures

2.1	Initial spreadsheet	32
2.2	Concordances around “ineffective teacher”	33
2.3	Thread of “ineffective teacher”	34

List of Tables

2.1	Myth as second-order sign system	17
2.2	Barthes' myth of the French soldier	19
4.1	<i>The Seventy Four's modus operandi</i>	80
4.2	Mr. Katz and the Golden Apple as mythic signifiers of equity and quality	84
4.3	The mythic reduction of quality to quantity, the economization of intelligence	87
4.4	"A new framework for the teaching profession"	87
4.5	Students' needs as a mythic signifier of Accountability	101
6.1	Learning styles as a signifier of choice	136
6.2	Educational needs as a signifier of employers' needs	137
6.3	The myth of effective teaching	137
6.4	Privilege as a mythic signifier of choice	138
6.5	<i>Brown</i> as a mythic signifier of <i>Vergara</i>	139
6.6	Plato et al. as mythic signifiers of creativity, etc.	140
6.7	Creativity and wonder as mythic signifiers of self-organization	140

Biographical Sketch

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music Theory with a minor in physics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. After a brief certification program at National-Louis University, I earned my Illinois certificate in high school mathematics, science, and music and a Master of Arts in Teaching in mathematics.

Between 2007 and 2012, I worked as a high school math and science teacher on the West Side of Chicago at an alternative charter school for re-enrolled dropouts. While working there, I earned a master's degree in Linguistics at Northeastern Illinois University. Besides a solid foundation in topics like phonology and generative syntax, that program introduced me to sociolinguistic concepts like identity construction, stance, positioning. There, I also gained a foothold in qualitative analysis methods. I presented at conferences in Chicago, Illinois; Boulder, Colorado; Aruba; and Athens, Greece. My master's thesis paper was on the spatial semiotics (Scollon's term, "geosemiotics") of Syntagma Square during Athens' 2011 Occupy movement.

Between 2012 and the present, I have delved deeper into studies in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Saussurian linguistics, Continental philosophy, and psychoanalysis. The educators who have guided my thinking the most have been Plato, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jacques Lacan, and Paulo Freire. By putting these and other thinkers against each other, I hope to someday answer the question, "What is education in and for itself?"

In 2017, I moved to South Carolina and spent the 2017–2018 school year teaching middle school mathematics.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Myths are not merely a passive representation of cultural life; rather, they are reflexive, in the sense that the cultural participants view their own culture through the spectacles of myth. They are therefore not just ideological representations of rules which inform a culture, they take part in the in-formation of culture; they are not always guided formations, but, in many cases, steering mechanisms as well” (Liszka, 1989, p. 15).

When I started exploring discourses about teachers, I was immediately struck by the many heroic narratives that they presented. These discourses dealt with exceptional, even sensational, accounts of teachers intervening in needy students’ lives. I failed to see myself or former coworkers in these narratives. They felt unreal, larger than life, mythic. This perception compelled me to broaden my theoretical understanding of myth especially as it relates to sociological frameworks. The next step was to read articles from widespread sources and personal blogs in order to spot patterns or contexts in which to apply the theories.

There are real contradictions in education, and the competing discourses about the nature of this crisis make up a fragmented picture. The teacher at the center of this contradiction is a chimerical figure. On the one hand, its basic incompetence threatens the constitutional right of every child to an appropriate education. On the other hand, a teacher can be a student’s lifeline, help them “live, love, and

breathe in the world” (Lolita, 2016), and set them on the path to college when they would otherwise end up in poverty, crime, and suicide (“Great Teachers Save Lives [Literally],” Edelman, 2015). One story describes a “passionate educator” (Jung, 2014), someone who goes above and beyond the call of duty, while in another the “brilliant eccentric” (Secret Teacher, 2015) is an endangered species that cannot be measured by any test. As these signifiers billow ever skyward, they perpetually fail to point to an object of political or professional praxis. In the 2016 presidential election, the topic of education was notably lacking from the discussion for the first time in decades. Evidently, no candidate could pick up enough of a signal from the masses to articulate into their vision.

This dissertation takes off from the premises of Mary Dalton’s (1995) study of teachers in Hollywood movies. In that study, she looks at “the way popular culture constructs its own curriculum in the movies through the on-screen relationship between teacher and student” (p. 23). While Dalton examines movies as diverse as *The King and I*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *Kindergarten Cop*, she distills the essential qualities of the teachers:

“Typically, he or she is an outsider who is usually not well-liked by other teachers, who are typically bored by students, afraid of students, or eager to dominate students. The ‘good teacher’ gets involved with students on a personal level, learns from those students, and does not usually fare very well with administrators. Sometimes these ‘good’ teachers have a ready sense of humor. They also frequently personalize the curriculum to meet everyday needs in their students’ lives” (Dalton, 1995, p. 27).

These teachers typically take the hero’s role, which connects the movies in Dalton’s study to the wider super-genre of Hollywood film (as opposed to, say, European art films). Sometimes, their work is part of their political project of awakening students to connect with and even change the world outside the school. While Dalton acknowledges the ethically, politically, and aesthetically progressive

values of these movies, as embodied in their protagonists, she ultimately concludes that “these Hollywood teachers are working on easing transitions for their students between school and the world outside classroom walls instead of participating in transformations that could radically recreate schools and other societal institutions as agencies invested creating in justice” (p. 41). She reaches this conclusion by noting what is absent in all the movies—the transformative, “prophetic” dimension of teaching, which “must arise in tandem with students’ own vision” (p. 40). Dalton recognizes the limits of Hollywood curriculum by contrasting it with alternative, transformational notions of curriculum, such as David E. Purpel’s “prophetic dimension” and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which seeks to transform society through the oppressed class’s struggle to reconfigure signifiers of oppression.

This dissertation proceeds in its methodology from the same origin as Dalton’s, with one key difference. In the same vein as Dalton, I seek to isolate invariants among disparate authors by finding their ideological limits, examining the wealth of dynamics present in popular educational discourses and finding out what is holding them back. To get at these dynamics, I will be employing theoretical frameworks of myth, which will offer a formal template for reading news stories and opinions. While Dalton contrasts the Hollywood curriculum with certain proposed concepts of curriculum (Freire’s and others), this dissertation seeks limits of curricula without an external point of reference.

Another point of similarity between Dalton’s study and this dissertation is that both use mass cultural artifacts as a stage for viewing the construction and play of identities. My studies focus on the ways social actors (parents, school reformers, philanthropists) insert themselves in narratives about school reform. I share her standpoint (from Aronowitz, 1989) that “individual and collective identities are constructed on [...] the technological sensorium that we call mass or popular

culture,” (Aronowitz, 1989, p. 197) especially “electronically mediated cultural forms” (p. 205). So, instead of looking at more hegemonic discourses on education from professional sources such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or even *EducationWeek*, I drew from sources like the *Los Angeles Times*, *Huffington Post*, *The 74 Million*, and personal blogs like *Curmudgucation* in order to learn about the larger society in which education is situated. Discourses from these outlets, analyzed in terms of their values and their ideological limits, could turn out to exert a greater influence on the field of education via the ordinary citizen than discourses that originate from and speak to the field.

In Chapter 2, I will describe the theoretical frameworks that inform this study, starting with anthropological and semiological conceptions of myth and then tying them to contemporary theories of media narratives. Making the case that news stories are inherently mythic will enable me to draw from the frameworks to create methods of collecting and coding articles and looking for themes and trends among them. I will be able to construct the mythic figures and their core dynamics—the crises they are supposed to solve (or cause) and the lost objects they are supposed to retrieve.

In the three chapters following Chapter 2, I apply the methods to discourses about particular school reform movements. Chapter 3 deals with the related mythologies of educational needs and choice, while Chapter 4 is about the mythic figure of the ineffective teacher, the bane of the Standards and Accountability movement. Chapter 5 uses a slightly altered method to look at Sugata Mitra’s particular digital learning project known as the School in the Cloud. Mitra and his commentators engage in discourse that is no less mythic than in Standards and Accountability and school choice, but the myths about School in the Cloud function fundamentally differently.

Standards and Accountability is about scientifically determining a *universal* curriculum and enforcing it by empowering districts to shut down schools that fail to meet universal standards. School choice is about freeing up schools to teach how they see fit and empowering parents (as educational consumers) to make *individual* informed choices about where to send their children. Advocates of Standards and Accountability can be experts in the field of education, while school choice advocates tend to be journalists, parent groups, and others who distrust the authority of experts. Choice advocates claim that “education is ripe for disruption” (Sheninger, 2016), and that we can’t wait around for schools to improve. Choice is seen as a way to escape the failure of accountability.

At first glance, the Standards and Accountability and school choice movements have seemingly opposite aims. However, these ideological foes are each driven toward a particular obstacle that recedes to infinity the more it is approached. School choice is driven toward the school that perfectly matches a student’s learning style and an educational landscape that maximizes access to the full diversity of settings. In this ideal, the school is maximally flexible in its curriculum and teachers are maximally flexible in how they deliver content. Meanwhile, Standards and Accountability is driven toward eradicating the ineffective teacher, which improved testing measures and legal flexibility *can and must*¹ root out. Parents who embark on the path of choice face the same impossibility as school districts seeking to root out the ineffective teacher.

As the analysis will show, myths that operate in discourses on school reform seek to cover up inherent contradictions in the institution of American schooling. If institutions were aware that their structures, goals, and ways of sensemaking were determined by their inherent contradictions, then they would realize the impossibility of overcoming these gaps while working within their current struc-

¹This conjunction turns up several times in my data set, mystifying the causal relationship between ability and duty.

tures. Positing a mythic figure in the gap enables institutions to experience endless forward progress without having to restructure themselves. The mythic figure is always an outsider that threatens the structure, in place of an inherent contradiction that determines the structure.

This forward progress that ends nowhere was first described by the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel in his discussion of the “bad infinite.” As Todd McGowan explains, the bad infinite refers to a historical process’s “inability to reach an endpoint” (McGowan, 2016, p. 136). It opposes “the finite,” which “has an external limit that one can never surpass,” and also the “true infinite”: “rather than escaping limitation, the true infinite limits itself, like the subject that confines itself to a single project out of a multitude of possibilities” (McGowan, 2016, p. 137). History is replete with examples of true infinities, and the *Brown v. Board of Education* case will serve as our example. The *Brown* court found that populations of children were receiving inferior education with testimony describing the vast discrepancy between a black child’s and a white child’s experiences. Although the question of the constitutionality of classrooms segregated on the basis of race was decided by a Supreme Court ruling, the unanimity of the *Brown* decision and the long history of cases preceding it bear witness to the type of question it was: on the absolute (in this sense, “infinite”) impossibility of segregation in a society of equals. *Brown* located the entire problem of segregation, the enduring falsehood of “separate but equal,” within the microcosm of the classroom. The particular *project* of desegregating schools (part of the larger movement of civil rights, racial equality, and integration) presented a true infinite in its self-limiting scope. Because school desegregation is an authentic project, its effects continue to reverberate in all sectors of society. Its meaning has been retroactively shaped and contested with every case that names it as precedent.

Unlike the new reality set off by *Brown*, the Fair Housing Act, the Voting Rights Act, and other accomplishments of the multiple actors of the Civil Rights Era, Standards and Accountability's dynamic of perpetually and incrementally surpassing its limits places it in the category of the bad infinite, and the mythic ineffective teacher is its ultimate crystallization.² "The bad infinite focuses the subject on the future and the possibility of a form of satisfaction that will never be realized" (McGowan, 2013). Standards and Accountability's definition of the crisis, that children are not college and career ready *enough* and that teachers need to do "a little bit better," has no endpoint, other than a vague incremental improvement in test scores or overall feeling that one's children are "more prepared" for college and career. None of my sources indicated any limits to the path of Standards and Accountability, whether self-imposed or world-imposed, in applying improved value-added measures and waging legal battles with teacher unions to regulate tenure and "performance-based" layoff procedures. Standards and Accountability sees obstacles on the horizon and then subsumes them into itself.

School choice faces a similar impossibility. The myth of the perfect school (defined by the equally mythic concept of a student's particular "learning style") enables school choice advocates to ignore the inherent impossibilities of educational systems to deliver a set of standards or skills to every student. Instead of beginning by assuming this impossibility, school choice advocates seek to close the gap between student and curriculum via the proliferation of learning styles and access to diverse educational settings.

²Despite that civil rights struggles continue, it is possible to speak of a Civil Rights Era that began in the 1950's and ended in the late 1960's. The multiplicity of voices and movements during this period is staggering, with fair housing, voting rights, workers' rights, economic self-sufficiency, and of course education movements leading to deep institutional changes, amid harsh repression from police, the legal system, and local conspiracies. It is difficult to imagine the progress of Standards and Accountability and school choice movements ever leading to an achievement on the level of the Fair Housing Act, Voting Rights Act, or Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, but as we will see that does not stop school choice advocates from attempting to associate their movement with civil rights.

If the bad infinite sets us on a path to waste and dissatisfaction, then the antidote to this problem will be the true infinite of a project: “Rather than escaping limitation, the true infinite limits itself, like the subject that confines itself to a single project out of a multitude of possibilities” (McGowan, 2016, p. 137). In Chapter 5, I will examine the possibilities inherent in one project, Sugata Mitra’s School in the Cloud. I will continue using my method of reading myths, in modified form, to see under what conditions the School in the Cloud’s Self-Organized Learning Environments can be an emancipatory project.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Frameworks and Analytic Method

2.1 Mythic narratives

James Jakób Liszka's narrative framework, from his 1989 book *The Semiotic of Myth*, provides chronological and causal aspects to this analysis. Liszka (1989) bases his analysis on Vladimir Propp's famous study, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, which showed how hundreds of Russian folktales could be broken down into the same set of 31 narrative elements. A particular story can contain some elements and not others, but their order is invariant except for a small set of inversions. Propp stressed the importance of the characters' *functions* toward the plot, not their names or other identifying markers. Liszka lists some of Propp's examples:

1. "A king gives an eagle to the hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Sucenko a horse. The horse carries Sucenko away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Ivan a little boat. The boat takes Ivan to another kingdom.
4. The princess gives Ivan a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry him away to another kingdom" (Liszka, 1989, p. 101).

While analysts of the historical school struggled to rigorously classify folktales, Propp discovered that actors across stories served invariant functions. Propp named the function of the king, the old man, the sorcerer, and the princess in these respective examples the “donor.” Seven such functions are identified by Propp: “hero, villain, donor, dispatcher, helper, false hero, sought-for-person” (Liszka, 1989, p. 102). Another name for the sought-for-person is victim. Each narrateme involves one or more roles: the hero leaves, the villain commits a villainy, the hero receives a magical agent, etc.

As the Structuralists pointed out, Propp’s formalism has its limits: just knowing the parts of a thing does not tell you everything about the thing itself. “Where Propp fails, the structuralists attempt to compensate. If the form is the story underlying all the variants, and the story is the external combination of likely sequences of functions, then *structure* is the underlying combinatory system which accounts for the genesis of those sequences” (Liszka, 1989, p. 102). If we know the rule structure, then, by choosing various combinations, we should be able to generate all the extant Russian folk tales. To arrive at this underlying rule structure, the first step is to group the 31 given elements according to their most basic relations. In the words of Lévi-Strauss,

“One can wonder whether... [Propp] does not stop the analysis too soon, seeking the form too close to the level of empirical observation. Among the 31 functions which he distinguishes, several appear reducible, i.e., assimilable to the *same* function reappearing in *different* moments of the narrative, but after undergoing one or a number of *transformations*” (Liszka, 1989, p. 103).

The crucial Structuralist concept in this quotation is borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory: the binary opposition. When the same function appears in a different moment after undergoing a single transformation, a pure moment of difference is isolated. The hero departs for his quest; he may either return victorious or fail to do so. There are two types of binary opposition here:

the syntagmatic one between departure and return, and the paradigmatic one between accomplishing the task and failing to do so. Liszka (1989) organizes Propp's functions into sets of opposites that bring together the syntagmatic and paradigmatic oppositions in the following way: A call to help is issued; will it be accepted or refused? A villainy is committed; will it be rewarded or punished? The villain undertakes a reconnaissance; will he succeed or fail to obtain information?

As Liszka explains, Lévi-Strauss's analytical method is based on the mytheme, the constituent unit of myth. Instead of a chronological sequence of narrative elements, a myth is more of a synchronic bundle of mythemes, and these bundles aim for the heart of myth's telos: "to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" (Liszka, 1989, pp. 105–106). Liszka is not satisfied with Lévi-Strauss's demonstration of the connection between a myth's narrative sequence and this telos. Liszka seeks to inject a diachronic asymmetry, a forward motion, into the framework consisting of Propp's functions and Lévi-Strauss's transformations with the concept of markedness. An example from linguistics is adding the prefix *un-* to the basic form "happy" to produce the marked "unhappy." The word "unhappy" might be synonymous with "sad," but note that the former is marked in reference to a more basic form, while the latter does not assume a more basic form. States can be marked by increased stress, difficulty, effort, or other unusual feature, while unmarked states are basic or default and are achieved with less resistance. In a narrative, a marked element extends or increases the narrative tension and postpones a resolution, while an unmarked element cancels a "move" and returns the narrative to equilibrium. Liszka (1989) diagrams Propp's elements in an example story (p. 115) by indicating the markedness of each element. For example, the hero departs in order to engage in combat with the villain. The state of his successful return is unmarked.

As Liszka observes, one major difficulty in marking binary oppositions is that it is not obvious which of two poles should be the marked one, or how to precisely define the opposition. This question persists even in everyday situations: In our current societal situation, which is marked, man or woman? If we look at the way man and woman (or he and she) are traditionally used in a sentence, it is clear that man is unmarked and woman is marked. “All men are created equal” is supposed to include women, while a sentence like “All women are created equal” would not be understood to include men. Man (in the sense of “human”) is the more basic and general term, while woman is specific. When a speaker uses the “she” pronoun as a replacement for the traditional one, or reverses the “normal” order of gender checkboxes to F and then M, that speaker marks their stance and positionality. The marked, or specific, term thus *contains the opposition*. If marking something as female introduces the concept of gender, then female-being is, in a sense, synonymous with having gender. The patriarchal system always seeks (and perpetually fails) to regulate and naturalize the feminine into the concept of “woman.” This is how Judith Butler (Butler, 1986) interprets Simone de Beauvoir when she says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Thus, the “meaning” or referent of the binary opposition is always ambiguous, always shifting, and always relying on other signifiers for meaning.

Analyzing markedness in binary oppositions of a narrative is therefore not possible without a normative context. Liszka explains that “the merely formal relation between the functions is not enough to account for, firstly, the peculiar qualitative difference between the functions, and, secondly, the dynamic or the tension that evaluative oppositions create” (Liszka, 1989, p. 111). For example, if an authority forbids an action, is the marked state obeying the action or disobeying it? The answer to this question cannot be known without situating the command in the narrative’s context. In order to know which is the lower energy state, we must

know something about the overall tendency of energy flow in a narrative. The listener must presuppose a narrative teleology that can speak to the various oppositions in a story, in order to know if an action was villainous. From a semiological standpoint, without this teleology, “hero” and “villain” are symmetrical signifiers. We need some indication of which is the unmarked, generic term and which is the marked, specific term. Note the asymmetry in the terms protagonist (“first contender”) and antagonist (“against-contender”).

Liszka finds the solution in knowledge that everyone has in the narrative form: the obvious fact that a narrative progresses through a moment of crisis to some resolution.

“The narration focuses on a set of rules from a certain domain or domains of cultural life which define a certain cosmic, social, political, or economic hierarchy, and places them in a *crisis*. There is a disruption of the normative function of these rules—they are violated, there is some transgression. The narrative then unfolds a certain, somewhat ambivalent, resolution to the crisis, depending on the pragmatics of the tale: the disrupted hierarchy is destroyed, leading to social anomie, or terrible tragic consequences, such as the introduction of pain, disease, or some sort of loss. The ambivalence of the resolution reveals the presence of a certain tension which serves as the dynamic of the narration, the tension between an order or hierarchy, i.e., a set of rules which imposes an order on a culture, and the possibility of an alternative order. The narrative of the myth continually plays out this tension” (Liszka, 1989, p. 15).

The simple result is that the narrative overall moves from marked states to unmarked states (Liszka, 1989, p. 116). In the first stage of a story, an established hierarchy among the characters is threatened by the villain. That is, the villain upsets the order of dominance between characters (king, princess, magician, outsiders, etc.). In order for the villainy to take place, the villain must succeed in messing up the established order and move the story from an unmarked state to a marked one. In the second stage, the hero understands this crisis of the threatened hierarchy and shores up all the necessary resources to combat the threat. In the

third and final stage, the hierarchy that was threatened by the villain is restored *and enhanced* by the hero.

Characters are ranked in a shifting hierarchy according to who defeats or dominates whom. For example, at the moment the hero accepts a quest, his rank rises above his “destinator,” such as the old king who depends on him to retrieve his kidnapped daughter, the “sought-after-person.” The moment the hero succeeds in bringing her back and is rewarded by marriage, his status falls below that of the old king, whose place in the hierarchy is restored. If the princess was kidnapped because she violated an order from the old king, the high status she enjoyed in thwarting his prohibition is punished by successive drops in rank to the villain, the hero, and the king. In this case, the initial hierarchy is not only restored (to king/princess/villain), but crucially enhanced in order to bring the hero and the princess to their rightful places—king/hero/princess—and ensure they stay there (Liszka, 1989).

As I see it, there is a dialectical logic at work in these narratives. In the formula of the story, the villain is neither a reactant nor a product—his status begins and ends as an outsider. Rather, the villain is the catalyst necessary to produce the hero. Only when the original hierarchy is disturbed can the hero disrupt the disruption and become who he is—a bearer of value. In the world of the narrative, the hero is the necessary figure who will overcome the disruption of the villain. However, from the reader’s perspective, the villain is the necessary vanishing mediator that creates an opening for the hero, who will insert himself in the established order. Heroes are made by villains, and not the other way around, and, as the anthropological tradition demonstrates, this fact is invariant across cultures’ storytelling traditions. We understand intuitively that values are produced by what is lost in narrative’s crisis; we might be surprised to find out that media

that are supposed to report “factual” narratives involve the same logic in their production of values.

Liszka sees a transformative potential in myths:

“Myths are not merely a passive representation of cultural life; rather, they are reflexive, in the sense that the cultural participants view their own culture through the spectacles of myth. They are therefore not just ideological representations of rules which inform a culture, they take part in the in-formation of culture; they are not always guided formations, but, in many senses, steering mechanisms as well” (Liszka, 1989, p. 15).

The *telos* of a myth is to provide a loose space in order for a culture to reflect on its own values. Here, *telos* does not indicate any kind of deep purpose housed in a mind, but the particular causal possibilities between an object and its environment. Gibson’s term *affordance* captures the idea: what possibilities for interaction does an object provide the subject in a particular situation? Their structure is rigid enough to persist as a recognizable object while enabling the members of a culture to reinterpret the structure’s underlying rules. Reading and writing myths entail each other. Therefore, a myth is never the completion of a process. There is no clear line between a myth and commentary on myth—no metalanguage.

“The ambivalence of the resolution reveals the presence of a certain tension which serves as the dynamic of the narration, the tension between an order or hierarchy, i.e., a set of rules which imposes an order on a culture, and the possibility of an alternative order. The narrative of the myth continually plays out this tension” (Liszka, 1989, p. 15).

The internal teleology of the mythic narrative, the journey from marked to unmarked, at first appears constrained by an inherent conservativeness. However, the way the hero inserts himself into the hierarchy—and enhances it—opens up myth to a myriad of interpretations.

2.2 Roland Barthes and the semiology of myth

Some concepts from Roland Barthes will enrich our narrative model by elaborating on the relationships between signs in the narrative. Barthes was influenced by Structuralist thinkers of the middle 20th century who sought to explain social relations in terms of symbolic exchanges. Claude Lévi-Strauss understood myth to be a culture's primary vehicle for grappling with its mysterious social relations and outlining its central antagonisms: life and death, kinship, nature and culture, taboos, and human origins. In his 1957 book *Mythologies*, Barthes extends Lévi-Strauss's ideas to discourses whose contents lie outside of "traditional" content. In his many explorations through aspects and products of contemporary bourgeois culture, Barthes outlines the particular linguistic mechanisms of myth. Our job will be easier than Barthes' in the sense that some of the discourse on teachers uses traditional mythological concepts overtly, especially the "superhero" teacher. Still, the point will not be to match characters and plots to stock mythic tropes, but to uncover the mythic structures within these discourses.

Both Lévi-Strauss's Structuralist anthropology and Barthes' semiology, the science of signs, draw on Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857–1913) theory of the semiological structure of language. Saussure's theory denaturalizes language, and Barthes saw his own work as continuing this denaturalization into the sociological and political realms. In our everyday use of words, we assume a natural association between the acoustic identity of a word (the "word itself") and its referent. The word "rose" naturally indicates a real thing in the world, in some context known to speaker and listener. Furthermore, the rose in turn indicates passion, and this too is taken as a natural association or equivalence.

Barthes seeks to denaturalize these connections by asserting that their connection is formed by history and convention. When we hear the word "rose," we are getting not only the word (the signifier) or the concept of roses (the signified), but

a third thing—a composition of the signifier and signified, the sign. “For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other, but the correlation which unites them: there are, therefore, the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms” (Barthes, 1991, p. 111). But where we see an integrated rose-sign, on the “plane of analysis” (p. 111) there are three parts: the rose (the signifier), the passion (the signified), and the act of signification itself, the bringing together of the signifier and signified to form the sign. Because of the arbitrary association between signifier and signified, the signifier cannot exist by itself. The sign of the passion-rose derives meaning from its surrounding signs—emotions, flowers, courtship customs. A sign only makes sense within a sign system.

1. Signifier	2. Signified
3. Sign /	
I. MYTHIC SIGNIFIER	II. MYTHIC SIGNIFIED
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 2.1: Myth as second-order sign system

In the chapter “Myth as a semiological system,” Barthes lays out the structure of a myth, adapting Saussure’s formula of a language sign. As Table 2.1 shows, for Barthes, a mythical system is a second-order sign system, in which the composed sign at the language level (3) is simultaneously a signifier at the myth level (I), which in turn signifies something else (II), something mythical. To make a myth is to appropriate a fully-formed sign (3) as a signifier (I) for some new signified (II). The resulting sign (III) is the myth, or the result of the action of mythmaking.

Barthes (1991) gives two examples in order to illustrate this appropriation. The first example is a myth of pedagogy. A student of Latin is confronted with the pattern sentence *quia ego nominor leo* (“because my name is lion”). When a student

of a foreign language learns a paradigmatic sentence, that sentence has been extracted from its original environment and thrust into the textbook as an example of a grammatical rule. The sentence *quia ego nominor leo*, borrowed from Aesop or Phaedrus, is telling us something other than its content. It ostensibly was used in the past to convey something about lions, something that grabbed the listener, because they had a rich set of associations with lions: that they are noble, that they prey on other animals, that they are literary subjects—in short, “a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature” (p. 116). Now it has been reduced to telling us “I am a grammatical example meant to illustrate the rule about the agreement of the predicate” (p. 114). The sentence (1) about lions (2) that was brought together into a sign (3) has come to stand in as a signifier (I) for a grammatical rule (II) in a pedagogical framework (III). Barthes makes a distinction between the “fullness” of signification on the level of language and the “emptiness” in the myth. The lion, its meanings, its associations, its sensory realness, are all emptied out into the “parasitical” (p. 116) form of the grammatical paradigm. Students must take it on faith that there is or was a deeper reality behind the bare sentence, that the sentence *simulates* something that will someday have more robust associations for them. The same is true for every science experiment, every novel, every historical document, and every linear equation. This faith is tested every time a student asks, “When am I ever going to use this?”¹

¹ A Barthesian-mythic study of curriculum is thinkable from this one example. It provokes the question: what abilities are sacrificed when a concept is re-appropriated toward a curriculum of “college and career readiness”? Could, say, the ability to solve for x signify some mythic aptitude or disposition towards demonstrating a particular form of procedural knowledge? In my teaching experience, this mythic level of content standards is only ever hinted at—why? I often hear that certain standards (like solving for x) have taken precedence over others (like proving a theorem) because they are easier to test. But I suspect that deep mathematical reasoning is taking a backseat to calculation methods because calculation methods (and the procedural discipline needed to master them) signify something to potential employers while rigor does not. Another factor for why we do not teach proof anymore could be the sheer number of standards we have to get through, which may also carry a sort of mythic meaning above its base “utility” for college or careers. I have included Sugata Mitra in this dissertation precisely because students of his Self-Organized Learning Environments do not have to ask, “When am I going to use this?”—they are enjoying it at the present moment.

The second example Barthes gives will be even more instructive, because, like my study, it appropriates a ready-made depiction of a human being in order to signify *something else*:

“I am at the barber’s, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally there is a presence of the signified through the signifier,” (Barthes, 1991, p. 115).

The sign of the soldier is composed of a signifier-image of a soldier that presumably signifies an actual Sudanese man who is a colonized subject of the French republic. This entire sign-meaning is put to the service of the myth of French imperialism. The black soldier’s being (2) is full and rich, but this being is withdrawn, “put in parentheses” (p. 116). And a different signified (II), this mythic Frenchness or imperialism, is brought into presence by the allusion the sign is making. In this particular magazine cover, the allusion to this mythic signified is obvious for Barthes and presumably for readers of the magazine in its day.

1. Photo of saluting soldier	2. The actual soldier
3. Sign /	
I. BLACK SOLDIER GIVING THE FRENCH SALUTE	II. “PURPOSEFUL MIXTURE OF FRENCHNESS AND MILITARINESS”
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 2.2: Barthes’ myth of the French soldier

Barthes expresses personal dismay at the power of myth, in his various references to emptying, robbing, and voiding of this anonymous soldier's essence. He objects to the surreptitious replacement of the individual with the particular. An individual is an infinitely contingent being in-itself, but as a particular instance of some universal, it becomes a mere sign of that universal. For Barthes, writing in 1957, when someone appropriates another's essence toward a universal, this constitutes an act of colonization. I find a deep resonance in this idea with the treatment of teachers in contemporary mainstream discourses, where an individual teacher is rarely allowed to simply exist. Instead, that teacher is immediately linked to an image: a collage-like description that draws from the vast, multifaceted mytho-historical archive of the American teacher. Identifying this rhetorical move will be a crucial part of my analysis.

It is tempting to believe that Barthes' critique of this magazine cover would not apply if it were printed today. After all, aren't ordinary people today more aware of the power of images and that some manipulation is constitutive of the image? Only a sociopath is outraged when the seductive image of the fast-food advertisement does not match their actual order. We know every image is photoshopped and we unconsciously perform some interpretation when we take it in. And despite the inherent purposiveness of the image (to deceive), we go along with it. So we may ask, were French readers of magazines really so gullible as to automatically "see" in the poster "that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors" (Barthes, 1991, p. 115)? We should keep in mind that, as we have made progress in exposing myths in one form, myth is always one step ahead of us: in online "listicles," in "flash cards," and in our very incredulity and distance to these forms.

By showing us two different forms, a pedagogical sentence and a pictorial magazine cover, Barthes suggests that myth can parasitize any sign system. If we accept myth as a form in which signs appropriate other signs, we can read mythologically any style or genre or form of discourse. Even a rigid mathematical formula like $E = mc^2$, which should resist any mythic distortion or need for interpretation, can be “robbed by myth,” as myth “makes of this unalterable meaning the pure signifier of mathematicity” (Barthes, 1991, p. 132). News websites such as *The Seventy Four*, with its “flash cards” informing parents “what they need to know” with a mathematical sincerity, economy, and above all objectivity, are the forms perhaps most vulnerable to myth.

2.3 Depoliticization

For Barthes, the realm of the political rests on both contingency and intention, which together constitute the “power to make the world” (Barthes, 1991, p. 142). Contingency refers to the ontological state of being open to the future, of resisting teleology and formal causes (that something exists “for” something else or “in order to” do something else). A contingent event could have occurred otherwise were it not for someone’s conscious decision. As for intention, for a matter to count as political, it must be reducible in some sense to a collective will that is itself irreducible. It cannot only be a matter of “what works.” Talk of “what works and what doesn’t” is prevalent in discourses that are supposedly political.

How, then, does myth work against the political? It works against both the contingency and the intention of a common question. Instead of a question being open, it becomes a matter of necessity. Things were not made this way; they just are this way. The question is naturalized. When the ability to change the future is removed, so is the responsibility to do so. The contrapositive of Kant’s “ought implies can” would be “can’t” implies “needn’t.” Hence a naturalization

of contingency—the conversion of history to nature—entails a depoliticization. At the heart of the myth lies the voided contingency, the trace of human activity that could have decided otherwise. An important part of my analytical method will be to indicate toward that void in the discourse, that object which is not spoken of and causes signifiers to perpetually orbit it. For Barthes, the kernel of myth is the self-asserting fact, or the concept (the hard-fought crystallization of human labor into a signifier) that presents itself as a natural observation.

“Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (Barthes, 1991, p. 143).

If myth provides clarity through distortion, then what is the undistorted reference frame? Barthes postulates an ideal Saussurean form of language that is perfectly suited to human action and the antithesis of myth. Before I discuss the actual possibility of such a language, I will explain Barthes’ distinction between language and myth. He begins his postulation:

“There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible” (Barthes, 1991, p. 146).

Mythic language, then, is not proper language, but “metalanguage”: not linked to the making of things, but to simply speaking *about* or around them. His example is the language a woodcutter uses to name a tree and his intention to chop

it down. In this form, “my language is operational, transitively linked to its object; between the tree and myself, there is nothing but my labour, that is to say, an action” (Barthes, 1991, p. 146). The word “tree,” signifying only this human intention, is inert in itself. This property, which is also called arbitrariness, disinterestedness, convention, neutrality, and equilibrium, is what enables political actors. This affordance of language toward politics is precisely what is lost in a myth. In their original contexts, the sentence “Because my name is lion” and the uniform of the black soldier referred to their real-life signifieds in the same disinterested way. The more conventional the relationship between signifier and signified, the greater the capacity for people to get things done. When signs are disinterested in their own signified content, they are also neutral with respect to each other. So, when they are brought into contiguity in a sentence, the intention appears to derive from the speaker, not the signs themselves. Only by bringing together disinterested signs (“black” and “soldier”, or “chop” and “tree”) can we feel the trace of the political.

By contrast to language, in myth, the relationship of signifier and signified is not neutral. The magazine cover is motivated to appropriate the French soldier to signify something else. The intention of the magazine is passed off as the intention of the uniform, an effect Barthes calls *alibi*.

“But for the myth-reader, [...] everything happens as if the picture *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier *gave a foundation* to the signified: the myth exists from the precise moment when French imperialism achieves the natural state: myth is speech justified in *excess*” (Barthes, 1991, p. 129).

For the magazine reader, the extra meanings that the saluting, uniformed soldier takes on as a result of being placed in a myth appear as a natural effect of the image. Instead of seeing the magazine editor’s intentional act of pasting the soldier in front of a French tricolor flag, the “myth-reader” sees the soldier as a natural effect

of being French. And this is the other side of the colonization: that the individual being lost by the soldier is gained by the myth. Or, at least, it gains the flavor of the soldier, a meaning that oscillates between the real soldier and the mythic soldier, “full on one side and empty on the other” (Barthes, 1991, p. 116).

For the purposes of the present study, I agree with Barthes as far as treating mythic speech as a form of double-talk, always using some common understanding of teachers in the service of talking about something else. While the existence of a “basic language” is spurious, it can serve as a useful hypothetical pole from which to measure the effects of signifiers colonizing each other. Some Poststructuralist students of Barthes’ argued that there is no distinction between “real” language and metalanguage. It’s translations all the way down. Even Barthes’ woodcutter will be lost in the translation of the tree. There was never any equilibrium between signifier and signified, no original meaning to revert to. As Todd McGowan points out, “when Barthes calls for a revolutionary language that would transcend myth, he does so in the language of myth” (McGowan, 2013, p. 238). What Barthes misses is that every productive act of speaking contains an overproduction. Despite the futility of Barthes’ hope of escaping myth, he still provides useful tools for identifying myths in discourse and their effects.

2.4 Reading Bennett with Barthes

There is no representation of reality without distortion, but the particular distorting bent of American news is and perhaps has always been mythological. Of all the theories of news, W. Lance Bennett’s will be most pertinent to this study, because I will be able to map a lot of the above mythic concepts onto the reading of news stories and synthesize a method from them, even though Bennett himself does not present his theories as having anything to do with myth. Bennett (2003) identifies four biases in news that feed through in succession. The first and most

fundamental bias is personalization: “the overwhelming tendency to downplay the big social, economic, or political in favor of the human trials, tragedies, and triumphs that sit at the surface of events” (p. 36). While such reductions have the capacity to shine truth on a situation by connecting the individual drama to universal issues, Bennett criticizes news media for failing to draw these connections. The personalization bias will play a role in the mythological method of my study, because it will enable the identification of a small number of mythic roles when they are present.

Because news articles reduce the relevant actants to a handful of personalities, the first bias feeds into the second one: dramatization. Bennett uses the word crisis as the central driver of articles, whose archetypal content is the story. Dramatization tightly fixes the story’s personages to the formation and resolution of a crisis. The interweaving temporalities that affect the human and nonhuman world are collapsed onto a single moment with a unidimensionalized past and present. Bennett (2003) makes a similar critique of the dramatization bias as the personalization bias: it fails to connect personal conflicts to the “great forces of history, science, politics, or human relations” (p. 43). Dramatization extends the depoliticizing effects of personalization by representing the future in terms of a narrow range of choices that important personages make in response to the crisis as they perceive it. When the range of actors and actions are reduced, the public’s expectations change: “the crisis cycles that characterize our news system only reinforce the popular impression that high levels of human difficulty are inevitable and therefore acceptable. Crises are resolved when situations return to ‘manageable’ levels of difficulty. Seldom are underlying problems treated and eliminated at their source” (p. 43). Bennett’s criticism suggests that treating school reform as a crisis rather than as an addressable issue may actually prevent committed actors from improving schools, because they will gain satisfaction from managing

personal dramas and fuss instead of from collectively overcoming situational obstacles. While my study does not subscribe to the view that society's problems can have a single "source" at which they can be eliminated, Bennett's explanation of dramatization is useful in perceiving the particular distortion that news stories perform. Although Bennett does not put it in mythic terms, the organization of news content and its personalities around a central crisis makes it fundamentally mythic.

The third bias, fragmentation, results from the temporal and conceptual book-ends placed on the drama. Because events unfold through the "actions and reactions of prominent figures" rather than "independent reporting based on investigation of events," (Bennett, 2003, p. 43), the continuity of an issue is lost. It becomes more difficult to see events in the unfolding of history.

The fourth bias is the "game frame" that presents news as a contestation with winners and losers. Public personalities are transformed into heroes and villains. This bias is the culmination of the other three: a crisis simply begins, without any previous context, through the actions of a villain. Who will win? Although Bennett does not mention Propp's morphology, he presents all the Proppian roles and functions, as well as a transformation of value hierarchies, in a neat capsule that allows us to see the mythic essence of news.

While Bennett's analytic framework allows us to see the formal similarities between myth and news, I still need to address the apparent difference in their "function." While mythic narratives are a cultural universal, have been shown to perform similar functions across cultures, and are deeply intertwined with that culture's practices (Lévi-Strauss, 1955), it may be difficult to assign them the same utilitarian function claimed by news. The unpredictable and excessive nature of myths attests to their autonomy with respect to culture. News, on the other hand, insists on its authoritative neutrality and "factuality," and this feature

distinguishes news from other narrative genres. Despite the avowed utilitarian function of news—“news you need to know,” “news that’s fit to print,” etc.—the present study postulates the same autonomy and excess in the institution of news as in myth. Since Benjamin Franklin’s time, when agricultural speculation, cautionary tales, and advertisements were the common stuff of print, the press has insisted that informed spectators will get the jump on the world and capitalize on it. However, the press’s encouragement of the colonists’ independence through (self-)destructive provocations attests that its true character was anything but utilitarian. This zeal persists to the present day: as Bennett (2003) notes, the American press was instrumental in selling the immensely destructive 2003 Iraq War to the public by concentrating almost all its coverage on the White House. President Bush’s hawkish pronouncements drove a huge amount of excess enjoyment for the press.² Rather than seek to repress this enjoyment, the more successful critics of the press and of the President were those who sought alternative sources of enjoyment, such as evidence of war profiteering. Despite that we often assign a positive value to the rousing pamphleteering of the colonial era and a negative value to the “sensationalist” 24-hour news cycle, their driver is the same.

The heart of news, the source of its enjoyment, is the object that is generated as lost (McGowan, 2013)—in mythic terms, the victim. News reproduces itself by perpetually inverting hierarchies, producing victims in an incessant restaging of crisis upon crisis, a process accelerated since the rise of the 24-hour news cycle. This theory suggests that the utilitarian logic that Bennett prescribes for American news—for spontaneously occurring events of authority and disorder to be dispassionately “captured” by news—would run counter to its traditions. The news must be satisfied through loss, even if it must construct a loss. The common driver of myth and of news is the continual production of values via its lost object.

²I use the term *excess enjoyment* in the Lacanian sense of a desire of the symbolic order to repeat itself by extending beyond the realm of utility.

Bennett has observed that news stories of late tend to forestall this resolution: “the dominant news focus has shifted away from portraying trusted authorities providing reassuring promises to restore chaotic situations to a state of order or normalcy”; instead, “the growing news trend is to portray unsympathetic, scheming politicians who often fail to solve problems, leaving disorder in their wake” (Bennett, 2003, p. 75). In the absence of “reassuring promises,” news stories leave us in a state of crisis and the question: what entity will fill the hero’s role, if not a traditional authority figure?

The formal definitions lend flexibility to Propp’s analytic method and justify their use in news stories. First, the reduction of events in the world to the acts of a handful of figures parallels the paucity of roles and narratemes in a mythic narrative. Second, both myth and the news are primarily focused on the management of a current crisis even as they set their sights on a better world to come. Third, they generate values through heroic actions or the inadequate actions of false heroes. Finally, both myth and news endlessly reproduce themselves and maintain social cohesion by introducing external obstacles as substitute targets for internal antagonisms. While news traditionally produced a hero that embodied the collective will, news now tends to generate and maintain crises (marked states) while we spectators wait for an unnamed hero to solve them.

In concluding on my theoretical frameworks, a note on the term *ideology*. Much of what I am aiming at with myth overlaps with several conceptions of ideology listed by Terry Eagleton (1991), including:

- “the process of the production of meanings, signs and values in social life;
- a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class
- ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; [...]
- that which offers a position for a subject; [...]

- the conjuncture of discourse and power;
- the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;
- action-oriented sets of beliefs;
- the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; [what Barthes calls *naturalization* ...]
- the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;
- the process whereby social structure is converted into natural reality” (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 1–2).

These conceptions may be lumped together broadly as “Althusserian,” in the sense that “criteria of truth and falsehood are largely irrelevant” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 18) to them, and they focus on the intersections of language, reason, perception, knowledge, and action. Eagleton’s conceptions that I have omitted from this list include “false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power,” “systematically distorted communication,” “forms of thought motivated by social interests,” “socially necessary illusion,” and anything else that distinguishes between “true” and “false” speech. The “Althusserian” conceptions of ideology are at the heart of the methods I developed from the mythic framework of Roland Barthes as well as the Proppian narrative as it operates in news (via Bennett). After all, for Eagleton, Althusser’s conceptions are basically synonymous with Hegelian concepts of myth (including Barthes’; see Eagleton 1991, p. 199).

In this strict sense, this dissertation can be called a mythico-ideological critique. However, the point of my work is more than merely to debunk discourses about education reform. My method of collecting and analyzing news articles points to the *reconstructive potential* of myth. This potential is visible in Hegel’s view on the *necessity* of myth in contemporary society, which is even more true

in our day than in Hegel's. In Hegel's view, modern society, with its complex of institutional discourses, has become totally opaque to itself. In the ancient past, completely transparent social relations were justified by naturally given myths. Conversely, in our time, the opaque social relations will require *the deliberate use of myth* to bring them to light:

“For the people as a whole to get their bearings within it, it is essential to construct a myth which will translate theoretical knowledge into more graphic, immediate terms. ‘We must have a new mythology,’ Hegel writes, ‘but this mythology must be in the service of Ideas; it must be a mythology of Reason. Until we express the Ideas aesthetically, that is, mythologically, they have no interest for the people; and conversely, until mythology is rational the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Thus in the end enlightened and unenlightened must clasp hands: mythology must become philosophical in order to make people rational, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make the philosophers sensible’” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 151).

The aim of this dissertation is to do both things: to make mythology more philosophical through ideological critique, and to make philosophy more mythological through the deliberate and transparent promulgation of “a mythology of Reason.” In dealing with myths of school choice, ineffective teachers, and the School in the Cloud, my goal will never be to *debunk* any of them, despite the temptation to engage the myths on this level. There is little use in attacking the factuality of the myth; in fact, some of the myths will prove to be irresistibly true, their figures uncannily lifelike. Discourses that debunk will merely strengthen the frame of the myth. The point is to make the frame visible, so that we, a collective subject, may select a new one. I will return to this idea in the concluding chapter.

2.5 Building a method from the frameworks

Now I will outline the method I used to collect and read discourses on school reform. I started out wanting to reproduce Barthes' *Mythologies*, in which he

wrote about the everyday myths of dish soap and sports cars and hinted at a method through his analysis of mythic sign systems. Like Mary Dalton and Stanley Aronowitz, I was drawn to texts of “electronically mediated cultural forms” for their power to reflect and to drive culture, in particular online forms. I sought to incorporate the theoretical frameworks above into some well-established methods of Discourse Analysis and news analysis.

David Altheide’s method of reading the news served as a starting point:

“The capacity to define the situation for self and others is a key dimension of social power. One reason to study mass media documents is to understand the nature and process by which a key defining aspect of our effective environment operates and attempts to gauge the consequences. The media are essential in social life” (Altheide, 2002, p. 33).

With a sufficient sampling of mass media documents, we can get a sense of how situations are defined in our social environment. The “key defining aspect” of interest to this study is school reform, and secondarily the debates on teacher accountability. In the data collection phase, I used the top 11 news sites according to the Alexa traffic ranking as of December, 2016. For each site, I took the top 5 articles sorted by “relevance” for each of the search terms “school reform” and “teacher accountability” with the date range starting in 2013. The first stage of data collection resulted in 110 articles—10 articles from 11 different websites. I extensively tagged these articles just in terms of common themes, such as failing schools, school closings, education for all, literacy, poverty, racial equality, neoliberal agenda, teacher training, business management, bringing together stakeholders, achievement gaps, innovation, charter schools, privatization, accountability, school choice, and testing validity. All of these tags were placed in a spreadsheet, a sample of which is shown in Figure 2.1. By tagging the articles this way, I was able to highlight cells that contained tags, reorder the articles by tag, and also look for concordances across articles (see Figure 2.2). All these data management

	A	B	C	D	F	G	H	I
1	#	Sour	search term	Title	Author	Date	Codes	Memos
5	Nyti	school reform		Massachusetts takes on a failing school district	Editorial Board	6/17/15	government intervention, corruption, school closing, turnarounds, community, teacher firing, ineffective teachers, dropout prevention, charter schools, teacher unions, union cooperation, structural reform	
6	Nyti	teacher acco		Raj Chetty Wins the John Bates Clark Medal	Lowrey, Annie	4/12/13	economic value of teachers	might be worth checking out what Chetty the microeconomist says about teacher accountability. In short: good teachers can be identified and raise value on the order of \$100,000 per student lifetime
7	Nyti	teacher acco		The New School	Stockman, Sebastian	8/22/14	teacher autonomy, professional development, measurement, testing validity, student enthusiasm, intrinsic motivation, inquiry-based, grit, focusing on inputs not outcomes, testing, high-stakes testing, failure as good pedagogy, black box, charter school, teaching to the test, time wasted, positivism	I *think* other articles have mentioned the amount of time lost to testing
8	Nyti	teacher acco		Zuckerberg's Expensive Lesson	Nocera, Joe	9/8/15	philanthropy, charter schools, merit pay, ineffective teachers, teacher firing, consulting, top-down, teachers unions, professional development, resources, funding, bureaucracy, demographics, collaboration	Assumption: there must be accountability
9	Nyti	teacher acco		Imagining Successful Schools	Nocera, Joe	8/29/14	testing, high-stakes testing, teacher firing, deprofessionalization, measurement, education for economy, professional trust, student accountability, government intervention, professional development, internal accountability, teacher salaries, teachers unions, teacher autonomy, comparison to other countries	

Figure 2.1: Initial spreadsheet

tools—in one giant Excel spreadsheet—helped me get a grasp on the ways that various signifiers were repeatedly or differentially mobilized toward defining a crisis and its various roles.

After identifying a mythic situation—a value hierarchy, a heroic bearer of values, a crisis, a lost object—I proceeded to thicken the threads by searching for other articles by that author or related terms. This method fits with Altheide’s prescription: “Collect the data, using preset codes, if appropriate, and many descriptive examples. [...] Midpoint analysis: About halfway to two thirds through the sample, examine the data to permit emergence, refinement, or collapsing of additional categories” (Altheide, 1996, p. 37). I examined this data with the help of memos, arranged in separate spreadsheets, which helped me piece together mythic narratives. As an example of this process, after some articles placed the object of reform on the removal of ineffective teachers, I pursued the ineffective teacher by following links and performing new searches with this term. The thickened thread on “ineffective teacher” ended up containing another 16 articles, which I placed in their own sheet, shown in Figure 2.3.

make it nearly impossible to reward great teaching and remove ineffective teachers. The most experienced teachers and possible for superintendents to make tough calls like replacing ineffective schools or negotiating labor contracts with real typically end up with the least experienced teachers, the most ineffective principals, unequal funding and less rigorous curriculum. In easier-to-handle classrooms, they may be deemed "ineffective" or even fired if too many of their students can't learn. If American public schools are failing, that public school teachers are ineffective, and that the steady application of standards, testing, and more ineffective teachers. That most of them are poor and minority students who are trapped in failing schools and saddled with ineffective teachers. Teachers whose ratings dropped to "ineffective" will be just one more ineffective rating away from dismissal, under changes to ineffective ratings. ineffective ratings.

That he wants to replace the law because, he said, it has been ineffective in improving schools. ineffective.

Between 2,750 to 8,250 California teachers rank as grossly ineffective. ineffective teachers it hasn't even sought to dismiss.

As Vivian Ekchian testified that the district employs 350 grossly ineffective teacher costs students \$1.4 million in lifetime education. ineffective teachers are often shuffled to low-income schools.

Economists Raj Chetty and Thomas Kane have found that a grossly ineffective teacher docks a classroom's aggregate lifetime earnings. ineffective teachers could be fired.

In 2012, about 4% of D.C. teachers -- and nearly all of those rated "ineffective" -- were dismissed. About 30% of teachers received new ratings. Tenured teachers with at least two consecutive "ineffective" ratings could be fired.

A 40-year-old Los Angeles mother of two said it should not prevent ineffective instructors from being fired for poor performance.

Figure 2.2: Concordances around “ineffective teacher”

Several of the articles in this sample will be discussed at some length in Chapter 4. Articles 3-6, by three different authors, present the same basic story but with different points. These memos outline some arguments on both sides, as well as missing features, as in Cell G7 where I imply that, other than Article 6, none go into detail about other factors besides bad teachers that could be influencing test scores. For these articles, I am also looking for “preset codes,” such as the “restoration of order” (Cell I4) mentioned by Bennett that I found in Article 3, or the crisis spelled out in Cell G5. Other thickened threads that I followed were on “disruptive innovation,” “needs,” and “Finland.” As I will explain, these memos helped me realize that, for many in the school reform community, the ineffective teacher was an axiomatic feature of contemporary schooling.

One advantage of Altheide’s collection method is that it is compatible with a variety of theoretical frameworks. The “preset codes” used to organize the data can have relationships that form a structure of their own, and so these relationships can be seen in the great mass of text written by diverse authors. The working

	A	B	C	D	F	G	H	I
1	#	Sour	search term	Title	Author	Date	Codes	Memos
5	Nyti	school reform	Massachusetts takes on a failing school district	Editorial Board		6/17/15	government intervention, corruption, school closing, turnarounds, community, teacher firing, ineffective teachers, dropout prevention, charter schools, teacher unions, union cooperation, structural reform	
6	Nyti	teacher acco	Raj Chetty Wins the John Bates Clark Medal	Lowrey, Annie		4/12/13	economic value of teachers	might be worth checking out what Chetty the microeconomist says about teacher accountability. In short: good teachers can be identified and raise value on the order of \$100,000 per student lifetime
7	Nyti	teacher acco	The New School	Stockman, Sebastian		8/22/14	teacher autonomy, professional development, measurement, testing validity, student enthusiasm, intrinsic motivation, inquiry-based, grit, focusing on inputs not outcomes, testing, high-stakes testing, failure as good pedagogy, black box, charter school, teaching to the test, time wasted, positivism	I *think* other articles have mentioned the amount of time lost to testing
8	Nyti	teacher acco	Zuckerberg's Expensive Lesson	Nocera, Joe		9/8/15	philanthropy, charter schools, merit pay, ineffective teachers, teacher firing, consulting, top-down, teachers unions, professional development, resources, funding, bureaucracy, demographics, collaboration	Assumption: there must be accountability
9	Nyti	teacher acco	Imagining Successful Schools	Nocera, Joe		8/29/14	testing, high-stakes testing, teacher firing, deprofessionalization, measurement, education for economy, professional trust, student accountability, government intervention, professional development, internal accountability, teacher salaries, teachers unions, teacher autonomy, comparison to other countries	
10								

Figure 2.3: Thread of “ineffective teacher”

hypothesis that news tends towards the mythic enabled me to read news and opinion articles for their mythic narrative structures. One possible set of codes was for Proppian roles or characters, bearing in mind that these roles can be filled by human or nonhuman actors/objects. Articles were read both in their synchronic rank—compared to other roles—and diachrony, so that the change in rank and the universal form of the folktale (movement from marked to unmarked states, resolution of a crisis and insertion of the hero) determine what actor fits what role. The villain is formally the agent that brings on a named crisis and disrupts a hierarchy by displacing the victim. This is a formal definition; the villain does not necessarily carry any evil intentions or personality defects. In fact, none of the roles carry any necessary attributes—this is Propp’s key discovery. The victim is the object that has been misplaced from its rightful location in the hierarchy, creating the value that the hero will embody, and this misplacement event is known as the villainy. The reader’s recognition of the crisis and of the victim are mutually dependent. While the victim stands for the villainy as such, the proper hierarchy is represented and ordered by the king. The hero is the definite and

intentional course of action that will restore the victim to its rightful place, consequently restoring the entire hierarchy. A trace of the hero may remain in the hierarchy in fossilized form the way a republican opposition to “tyranny” defines American politics to this day. It is important to note that the victim is not the beneficiary of the hero’s actions; the victim is barred from this role because it is an object. The beneficiary of the heroic actions is the king, who stands for the hierarchy as such. While the roles of victim, villain, and hero proved relatively easy to identify in the data, picking out the king was often not obvious, as I will show. A way to locate the king is to follow a chain of justifications to the point at which a signifier is left unjustified (or tautologically justifies itself); this signifier, the master-signifier that organizes all those under it, is the king.

As mentioned above, Bennett suggests that the false hero’s prominence has recently increased in news: “the dominant news focus has shifted away from portraying trusted authorities providing reassuring promises to restore chaotic situations to a state of order or normalcy”; instead, “the growing news trend is to portray unsympathetic, scheming politicians who often fail to solve problems, leaving disorder in their wake” (Bennett, 2003, p. 75). In the absence of “reassuring promises,” news stories leave us in a state of crisis with the question, what entity will fill the hero’s role, if not a traditional authority figure?

In researching the chapters that follow, all work began by identifying the mythic roles and structures I just described. When a chain of signifiers seemed to reach a mysterious dead-end, when a value was created from a lost object, when a heroic quest was undertaken with little thought for the end goal, that was a starting point for analysis. It is important to remember that this method is not seeking the most salient myth. In order to conclude that a myth is objectively more influential than another, I would need access to some causal mechanism of discourse, if one even exists. Instead, my method deliberately pursues articles that strengthen or compli-

cate the dynamics of the initial article in which a myth was identified. As a result of my initial search terms and the focus on Proppian/Bennettian roles and crises, the article collection phase generated many articles about teachers, parents, and political figures, but not much on other salient aspects of contemporary education reform discourse, such as the global competitiveness of the United States, literacy campaigns such as Education for All, technical issues such as class size and funding, bilingual education, tutoring, and focusing on truancy and the dropout rate.

Chapter 3

Mythology of School Choice

In this chapter, I analyze mainstream news discourses about school choice. In my initial search for “school reform” in news sites, school choice played a large role overall. Of the 110 articles in my initial data set, I coded 23 as mentioning school choice. These articles served as a basis for expanding into more news and opinion articles, as I looked for similar wording or discursive mechanisms across articles.

While reading these articles, it quickly became clear that school choice was being given a mythic importance by various authors, touted as an end in itself. Many of the articles did not even see fit to justify placing choice on the end of the signifying chain. For those authors, choice is in danger, and we have to save it. Several questions followed from this initial observation:

1. How is the myth of school choice supported by other signifiers?
2. How does the myth of school choice mobilize the enjoyment of educational actors?
3. Why is the myth of school choice so pervasive?

This chapter will discuss these questions at length, but I will briefly answer them here. The other signifiers that emerge as supports for school choice are educational needs, learning styles, employment, testing, and empowerment. With these sup-

ports, the myth enables educational actors to expend vast amounts of effort and resources, thereby reproducing themselves as caring, driven subjects of education. It also allows them to ignore the deep societal contradictions that, were they to face them directly, would compel them to alter their subjectivities.

3.1 The myth of needs

Before examining the dynamics of school choice discourses, it will be useful to examine some of the talk around the related concept of educational needs, which, as the data show, are one criterion on which families will base their choice of school. The concept of needs in American education has transformed greatly in past decades, so it is the ideal focus for using Altheide's method of focusing on key differences.

In the years leading up to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, educational needs were discussed in a much more social way than today. The cultural tide had turned from progressivism to behaviorism, but the concept of needs did not change much from John Dewey to Ralph Tyler. For John Dewey, the purpose of schooling was to acclimate children to the "actual problems of life" (Warde, 1960). All students had the same needs, because all students had to be prepared to live in the same physical and social world, as democratic citizens. Dewey recognized that students' diverse interests must be taken into account:

"The actual interests of the child must be discovered if the significance and worth of his life is to be taken into account and full development achieved. Each subject must fulfill present needs of growing children" (Warde, 1960).

Ralph Tyler's (Tyler, 1949) influential book *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* outlined how schools could organize "learning experiences" for students and evaluate how well those experiences are meeting the purpose of the

school. The concept of a *learning experience*, a specific encounter between a student and an educational object, had already been known among Dewey's and Vygotsky's schools of thought. Tyler puts a behaviorist spin on this concept—urging school officials to ask what kinds of behaviors their learning experiences are effecting—but otherwise leaves it intact. To this end, students' psychological needs should be considered as a way of helping the school select profitable learning experiences (Tyler, 1949, p. 8). Ultimately, “needs,” as the dependent variable among the different groups within and between schools, is synonymous with content knowledge gaps.

The problems discussed in educational journals of the time align with Tyler's approach to diversity. For example, in the 1953 issue of *Educational Leadership*, articles pose questions like “How can the teacher best meet—and most wisely use—the wide range of differences in abilities, interests, and development represented by children under his guidance?” (Washburne, 1953). Other articles from that issue have titles such as “Matching ten reading levels in one classroom,” “Ways of providing for individual differences,” “Adjusting the program to the child,” and “A faculty meets the needs of pupils.” That last article outlines best practices that teachers should apply to all students, arguing against promoting students to the next grade based on a set of criteria. Several of these articles offer practical advice to teachers on how to reach students at multiple levels, urging them not to present material until a child is ready. While these articles recognize differences in individual interests and abilities, they urge teachers to “use” these differences to help students reach a higher reading, math, and spelling level. Student abilities are always considered on one spectrum, as measured by students' “mental ages” (Washburne, 1953). At this stage, the universality of the curriculum is unquestioned.

The *Brown* ruling universalized a concept of educational needs that was already in place. It set into motion cases that ultimately led to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court case *Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley*, which “ruled that students who qualify for special education services must have access to public school programs that meet their unique educational needs” (Esteves & Rao, 2008, p. 1). Throughout this line, the goal was to minimize the gap between students identified with special needs and students without this identification (IDEA, 2010). The Individualized Education Program (IEP’s) and 504 plans used by schools today still work under a model of identifying and mitigating obstacles (known as “needs”) to the student’s access to the general curriculum. In sum, these cases universalized a view of the problem of education that professionals had prior to *Brown*. Schools were now obligated to raise the quality of learning experiences of underserved groups—groups with particular needs and their associated “risks”—to the level of the mainstream.

A parallel and radicalized concept of educational needs was developing as schools sought to integrate elements of Howard Gardner’s influential Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). Proposed in 1983, MI was a critique on the notion of general intelligence, that intelligence tests were too narrow in their scope (Strauss, 2013). Gardner suggested that, by testing students according to verbal and mathematical intelligence only, schools could be undervaluing their capacities to “solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (Gardner, 1999). Gardner postulated a particular set of “intelligences,” or modalities of cognition and learning, that have become ubiquitous in educational literature—visual/spatial, musical, intrapersonal, and others. In Gardner’s words,

“The basic idea is simplicity itself. A belief in a single intelligence assumes that we have one central, all-purpose computer—and it determines how well we perform in every sector of life. In contrast, a belief in multiple intelligences assumes that we have a number of relatively autonomous computers—one that computes linguistic information, another spatial information, another musical information, another information about other people, and so on. I estimate that human beings have 7 to 10 distinct intelligences” (Strauss, 2013).

Many have criticized the unscientific nature of Gardner’s “theory,” that it was based on “hunch and opinion” rather than “psychometric or other quantitative evidence” (Eberstadt, 1999, p. 7). Not long after the introduction of MI, schools began conflating it with the notion of “learning styles,” a concept that began with MRI research around the same time as MI (Revell, 2005). “Learning styles” apparently gave Gardner’s work a concrete enough basis that, by the 1990’s, MI was canonized in the education profession, government, and academia.

Now, applying Altheide’s method of reading across contemporary articles, we can pick out some key similarities and differences among various mentions of educational needs. Revell, writing in *The Guardian*, describes how the concept of learning styles was taken up by the British Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

“Questioned about its endorsement [of learning styles], the DfES was unrepentant. ‘The booklet does not adopt an uncritical approach to the issue of “learning styles”’, a spokesperson says. ‘On the contrary, it specifically states that ‘pupils need to be given opportunities to learn in a range of ways and so extend their styles’, and that ‘planning for range over time is the key’. The references to research present a number of different ways of considering the question of ‘learning styles’ and deliberately does not advise teachers to adopt any single one at all” (Revell, 2005).

While this spokesperson cited by Revell may be arguing for a reasonable and balanced implementation of learning styles, they have already turned individual students’ learning styles into a need that the teacher must address. Revell quotes a

dissenting opinion, ignored by the DfES's booklet, which suspects that "the appeal of learning styles may prove convenient, because it shifts the responsibility for enhancing the quality of learning from management to the individual learning styles of teachers and learners" (Revell, 2005). If the public school system has identified that students need to be taught according to their learning styles, then school administrations and teachers face a much different definition of accountability than they did under IDEA.

Here we can see how educational needs have radicalized. The old view was that students excluded from traditional education required special supports to enjoy learning experiences comparably to the non-excluded. The new view (whether MI or learning styles) does not differentiate between special and mainstream students. There are no exceptional cases—every student has a particular set of intelligences or learning styles—but both concepts will always be murky, with the precise number of distinct intelligences still unknown and still no conclusive research on learning styles.

Mary Eberstadt (Eberstadt, 1999) objects to Gardner prioritizing the intelligences above curricular content. "No one could object to the reading of survivor stories, say, or to an in-depth look at Eichmann's trial in Israel in 1961, or to reviewing the literature on the Wannsee conference. But the insistence that these are mere 'entry points' for certain kinds of 'intelligences,' entry points no more or less 'privileged' than any other, will not stand up" (Eberstadt, 1999, p. 13). If the question of what is taught is not sufficiently prioritized, then there is nothing linking students to the society they are growing into. The concept of a universal curriculum vanishes, and with it, all the gains made after *Brown*.

Eberstadt concludes that MI fits an elitist ideology—elites will use MI to dismiss the standardized tests that would keep schools accountable and all students

on the same playing field. She argues that MI cannot be credible unless it is applied to disadvantaged populations:

“The more the private schools tack to the wind—abolishing grades, eradicating tests, and otherwise disposing of the instruments that have traditionally allowed worse-off students the means by which to elevate themselves—the harder it will become for any child to join those schools except through accident of birth” (Eberstadt, 1999, p. 17).

Eberstadt isolates a contradiction in progressive education: the very standards of universality by which we can say that a group of students have special needs or disadvantages are undermined by the dissolution of the general curriculum under MI. The contradiction that Eberstadt enunciated in 1999 was precisely the impetus for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which required schools receiving federal funds to make Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by standardized tests.

In my teaching experience over the past 10 years, I have seen a kind of compromise between universal curriculum and individual learning. The general curriculum, as assessed through standardized tests in reading and math, still provides a universal standard. However, teachers are expected to help each student access this curriculum through various learning styles. IEP’s and 504 plans are not enough—teachers must specify in their lesson plans how to “differentiate instruction” to cover all students, including those not identified by law. MI is still subordinated to the general curriculum; it provides a means of access to the curricular content.

In my estimation, Gardner’s critique of the way we measure intelligence was too quickly positivized by his supporters as well as detractors. The *mélange* of learning styles with MI resulted from a hasty drive to scientize and positivize MI, which leaves it vulnerable to the criticism that its unfounded claims lead to bad professional practices (Revell, 2005). Gardner himself calls MI his “belief,” a guiding disposition against the research program of general intelligence originally

intended for his small audience of Piagetian researchers at Harvard (Eberstadt, 1999), and not as a blueprint *for* schools (Revell, 2005).

The theory of Multiple Intelligences paradoxically operates only as long as it fails to describe cognition or prescribe a curriculum or assessment framework. Eberstadt points out Gardner's endless proliferation of concepts and lists of "'mind and brain findings' that 'ought to be kept in mind by anyone concerned with education'" (Eberstadt, 1999, pp. 10–11). MI compels us to observe that our traditional assessments are lacking, while leading us down an infinite path of filling this lack with more intelligences, more "entry points," more creative ideas. Such a drive will no doubt produce creative results, but it will not change the system because it will never find the missing signifier, the final intelligence that will bring closure to the system. Todd McGowan (McGowan, 2013) gives the name "hermeneutic" to any program devoted to interpreting the missing signifier and keeping it invisible. Eberstadt's charge of elitism agrees with this observation. As she sees it, the more the educational structure empirically fails to provide evidence of intelligence, the more it will exclude them on the basis of "birth," until some putative future when their intelligence may be recognized. Gardner's work attempts to turn a structural absence into an empirical one, one that is always just out of reach. The problem is that there will always be students whose intelligence we cannot presently account for, no matter how many intelligences we invent. "The endless seeking of the hermeneutic position functions as a barrier to genuine political engagement; it allows the subject to avoid the political act of identifying itself with the missing signifier" (McGowan, 2013, pp. 275–6). When the structural absence is mystified, political subjectivity evaporates—there is no enemy, no object around which to structure change.

If the hermeneutic program leads us away from the problem, what position would enable the subject to fully engage with it by "identifying itself with the

missing signifier”? McGowan’s position, influenced by psychoanalysis, is to see that the missing signifier is not an accident or externality of the system, but the very thing that provides its structure and animates it. We should see that the gap between students who are recognized and those who are unrecognized by MI already *inheres in the students who are recognized*. “Instead of working directly to expand the umbrella of rights to include more of those excluded, the political act would involve the refusal, on the part of those on the inside, to accept the benefits that insider status provides” (McGowan, 2013, p. 280). Rather than try to account for every child’s unique intelligence, we should sever our connection between intelligence and the benefits it is supposed to confer on the intelligent—a seat in an elite school or a path to a prestigious career. This view departs from Eberstadt’s suggestion that the “worse-off students” should be allowed to “elevate themselves” through instruments based on a universal curriculum.

While learning styles were supposed to make education more inclusive, they have enabled the gap between insiders and outsiders to widen. Meanwhile, as the structure congratulates itself on its inclusiveness, the implementation side of the structure—teachers—face greater pressure to fulfill the promise. According to Frank Coffield at London’s Institute of Education, “For government agencies, policy-makers and politicians, the appeal of learning styles may prove convenient, because it shifts the responsibility for enhancing the quality of learning from management to the individual learning styles of teachers and learners” (Revell, 2005). This idea agrees with my overall experience of teaching and talking to teachers. Though we may try to draw a boundary between our professional practice and the results, reminding ourselves that there is no way to directly control the outcome of a learning experience, we suffer feelings of guilt and responsibility for individual student failure. We wonder whether a child possessed some intelligence that, had we only recognized it, would have provided a route to the curriculum.

We wonder whether we missed a possible “entry point” or “hook.” These may be good practical matters for any teacher to consider, but they cause unnecessary and unproductive anxiety when the question of failure hinges on teachers’ adequate differentiation of instruction.

Coffield, Moseley, Hall, and Ecclestone (2004) carried out a vast statistical meta-analysis of learning styles and found no conclusive evidence of their existence or that aligning teaching with learning styles yields significant improvement. The authors cite John Dewey’s “stirring words” from his *My Pedagogic Creed*, that “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 128). They are surprised at how little progress has been made in the English-speaking world since Dewey’s time on the question of how to reconstruct human experience.

“The DfES Standards Unit, the inspectorates and the curriculum and awarding bodies all, in their different ways, interpret pedagogy as the unproblematical application of apparently neutral, value-free techniques, which they have accorded the status of ‘best practice’, without always making clear the evidential basis for their claims” (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 128).

To Coffield et al., current educational practice is like a toolbox cobbled together for a poorly defined job. Given the “theoretical and moral vacuum created by the lack of one generally accepted theory of pedagogy” (p. 128), it is not surprising to find an extreme eclecticism of practices—a mess of signifiers without any organizing principle—attempting to fill the vacuum.

Only when a theory of pedagogy is generally accepted, including a moral component, will the concept of needs make any sense. It will be no less mythic, but it will cease contributing to a bad infinite. For example, in a Deweyan or Vygotskian concept of pedagogy (or even a Tylerian one), the main program loop of schooling involves encounters with objects that facilitate meaningful experiences (which in turn for Tyler lead to good behaviors, for Dewey “social progress and reform”

(Coffield et al., 2004, p. 128)). In any of these pedagogies, student needs are much more well-defined than the contemporary mainstream; what students need is precisely an object that will provoke a meaningful encounter, and an environment that will facilitate this encounter, whose meaningfulness is determined by the declared mission or moral framework of the pedagogy. Through these repeated encounters, the needs and expectations of society and of the student are brought into a visible and productive tension. The student sees their task as *subject*: to struggle to find a space to exist within society's constraints, to take a stance with respect to them. As we will see, certain contemporary discourses seek to erase this tension between student needs and societal needs, thereby depriving the student of subjectivity.

3.2 The needs of students *and* society

Now, turning to the articles in my data set, I will show how the method generated useful findings. The web search for “school reform” in the most highly visited websites yielded, as expected, articles with numerous points of view and focuses. Of particular interest to this study was a series in Huffington Post, in which C. M. Rubin interviews educational policy thinkers about how the United States could put “every student on a path towards a successful future” (Rubin, 2017b). Rubin interviews Julia Freeland Fisher, who “leads a team that educates policymakers and community leaders on the power of disruptive innovation in the K-12 and higher education spheres through its research” (Rubin, 2017b). Methodologically, this interview is a good entry point because of Fisher's clear-cut chronology: in the past, things were done this way, but now under a new set of values, we operate differently. When asked, “What has the US as a whole accomplished since 2012 in the field of education? Given the shift in focus in the global education reform

debate from the 3 R's to the 4 C's, what are the critical steps we need to take to produce a new education framework for the US?" Fisher responds:

"A new education framework will fundamentally upend the hegemony of the factory-based model of school that dominated the past century. Whether we are optimizing for the 3 R's, the 4 C's or any other ends, our traditional model of education has struggled to meet the needs of each individual student because it was never designed to do so" (Rubin, 2017b).

The "hegemony" that Fisher seeks to "upend" was designed as a factory, which did not care about student needs. Another article coded "innovation," this one on CNN.com, echoes this story with a quotation from philanthropist Laurene Jobs,

"XQ America says the purpose of the campaign is to transform high schools from an institutional, factory-like learning environment to a more open, innovative style of education that prepares students for the modern world.

"In the last hundred years, America has gone from a Model T to a Tesla and from a switchboard to a smartphone, but our public high schools have stayed frozen in time,' said the organization. 'We believe American ingenuity can and must move education forward" (Smith, 2015).

The mythic framework allows us to identify the same crisis in both articles (and many others): the factory-like learning environment, and the same value generated from this crisis: that schools should prepare students for the modern world. Returning to Fisher's interview with Rubin, Fisher's new framework will meet these new needs through "software programs that can deliver instruction and assessment," which "affords students greater flexibility and choice in how and when they move through their learning. Technology, however, is not a silver bullet," (Rubin, 2017b) because these upended classrooms will require cooperative leadership that will resist "giving into the temptation to simply digitize our monolithic 19th century classroom" (Rubin, 2017b). This part of the article is clearly about meeting individual students' needs.

In the second half of the interview, Rubin adds a twist: “How do we make Higher Education more effective in meeting the employment needs of the world outside the campus?” (Rubin, 2017b). Through Rubin’s abrupt shift in focus, these two different ends—fulfilling employers who need workers and high-school graduates who need jobs—are facilely juxtaposed. Fisher brings together the two concepts, overabundance of unskilled workers and the demand for skilled work, with the concept of curricular “alignment”:

“Amidst debates about college access and affordability, we think the question of employer needs should sit at the core of higher education conversations. Without answering it, we risk pumping more and more students through a costly system that is not aligned in reliable ways to the job market.

“Tackling this problem is both an issue of demand and supply—that is, employers’ demands for particular types or skillsets or talent, and the corresponding supply of the types and skillsets of graduates that higher education is producing. Employers chronically struggle to articulate their precise needs to higher education institutions. That said, institutions of higher education remain chronically misaligned with the labor market and fixed in their ways” (Rubin, 2017b).

In this view, industry, the “world outside the campus,” is progressively demanding “skillsets or talent” from workers, ready to employ graduates if they can arrive to the market with adequate skills. Previously, it needed manual laborers, but now it needs creative thinkers and innovators. While higher education traditionally listened to industry’s demands and supplied the “corresponding” type of graduate, this communication has broken down by misalignment and inertia. In Fisher’s narrative, this is the crisis education now faces. The heroic task is to “reliably” realign higher education with the needs of employers. Fisher does not explicitly link the educational needs that the new K-12 system will address with graduates’ skillsets. However, the K-12 students whose needs would be met by this new software and flexible curriculum are destined to graduate and become the workers with skills aligned with employers’ demand. In this way, students’ educational

needs, their need to be employed, and employers' need for workers are all three blurred together.¹

How is Fisher's societal hierarchy mythic? If looked at from other angles, the crisis ceases to exist or at least shifts. For example, the problem of curricular misalignment may be a problem for employers, not for higher education! Without stating so, Fisher is choosing to conceive of higher education's purpose as providing the job market with workers. This misalignment is not a natural problem, but an ideological one that is naturalized by myth. Whenever we are presented with a set of needs that are, as Fisher would have it, "precisely communicated" and satisfied, we are in the realm of myth. A mythic conception of society views it as a closed totality, with its internal contradictions posited as external (McGowan, 2013, p. 285). Fisher's higher education does not exist for itself, and so it is lacking any internal contradictions. But, as we know, any relationship between education and labor (not to mention education and labor in themselves) must be fraught with antagonisms and excesses—graduates with unexploitable skills, labor traditions that thwart the smooth accumulation of profit, the inherent untestability of knowledge, etc. However, in Fisher's myth, the internal limitations of education (the impossibility of education, as Freud would have it) and of markets (including the labor market) are externalized as obstacles to be overcome. From these external obstacles, a new villain precipitates—the antiquated school system. This mythic space enables Fisher's allies to direct their resources and energies toward improving "communication" between industry and education. As the system's lethargy and red tape thwart them, they can remain steadfastly opposed.

Fisher operates in the same position as proponents of Multiple Intelligences—the hermeneutic position. She converts the gap between education and labor, a gap

¹Remarkably, in the "conversations" that Fisher calls for—that word typically connoting an exchange of ideas between equals—there is no possibility for higher education to articulate *its* needs to employers!

that is structurally impossible to fill, into an empirical gap that can and must be filled. She does this through a process of “interpretation”—by proliferating partial approaches to a problem and leaving the rest for someone else to figure out. In order for these solutions to make sense, Fisher reinterprets aspects of education in particular ways—specifically, she borrows some of the content of the overworked teacher to fashion a mythic educational worker struggling against an antiquated curriculum.

To begin, Fisher expresses some optimism at emerging models of a new type of employer-driven curriculum:

“In particular, online competency-based programs are emerging both within existing institutions like Southern New Hampshire University and Western Governors University, and in new startups like Udacity. These programs offer not only flexibility in how students move through their learning, but also break learning down into ‘competencies’ which often align directly to employer and industry-driven needs” (Rubin, 2017b).

In Fisher’s view, the chronic misalignment she identified earlier is already being remedied by these programs. While traditional curriculums suffer under their own weight, the new curriculum is made “flexible” by modularizing into “competencies.” Second, Fisher molds the rich, timeless content of the teacher into a new form:

“For example, the role of a single teacher can start to ‘unbundle’—such that teachers can actually play to their strengths and passions rather than having to serve as a jack-of-all-trades to a large cohort of students” (Rubin, 2017b).

Teachers’ “strengths and passions”—words that (for me, at least) evoke professional mastery in service of a solemn calling—are re-formed into “unbundled competencies,” in much the same way that the rich content of Barthes’ French soldier is flattened onto a kitschy magazine cover. Third, in the new mythic horizon, the difficulties that teachers face are re-formed: the teacher is overworked not for the

reasons identified by Coffield et al. (the responsibility for meeting learning styles), but because she is forced to be a jack-of-all-trades. The interconnected tasks that holistically form the profession of teaching are separated and repackaged. The teacher's "strengths" now cannot be considered as historically-informed professional activities, but merely as a combination of unbundled competencies. And just as a teacher is reduced to a checklist of "strengths," the student is equally mythologized into a checklist of "competencies" driven by industry. Through these constructions, Fisher reconfigures the value of an education into alignment with employers' needs to fit within the horizon of the 21st century economy.

In these ways, the myth not only opens up a space of objectivity, but constrains what can be thought. This ability of a myth to re-articulate and reshape previous antagonisms within its horizon is Ernesto Laclau's definition of hegemony. For all the talk about "upending the hegemony of the factory-based model," Fisher wants to replace it with the hegemony of the existing, 21st-century business model.

As an externalized obstacle, the villainous character of the antiquated system follows from the perceived failed symbiosis of education and labor. First, for Fisher the educational system "has struggled to meet the needs of individual students because it was never designed to do so" (Rubin, 2017b). But, we can modernize the curriculum by making it more student-centered, which means focusing on students' learning needs, as long as these needs are considered within the symbiotic horizon of employers' needs.

3.3 The infinite curriculum

In my data set, Julia Fisher is exceptionally explicit about about the primacy of the job market and students' subordination to it. Authors differ on the course of action to help students access this economy: either by shrinking the curriculum down to a set of universal "skills" (what I will call the first obfuscation) or through a flex-

ible curriculum parceled out to students according to their “learning styles” (the second obfuscation). In the first obfuscation, authors mask the dominance of the economy through concepts like “skills” and “preparedness,” ostensibly elevating students to the status of a free agent navigating the school system to get what they need to face the job market. Here, the economic system is not a bearer of values, but a neutral, natural world: “an age of globalization and artificial intelligence” and the juxtaposition “workforce and world” (Rubin, 2016). They are part of this world, and this world inheres in them. With the student’s goals for education pulled into alignment with the economic system’s, a hierarchical relationship is converted into a symbiotic one.

The article from my data set that exemplifies this confusion most aptly is in the same C. M. Rubin interview series in *Huffington Post*, this one with Charles Fadel, “a visiting practitioner at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, founder and chairman of the Center for Curriculum Redesign, and co-author of a best-selling book titled *Four-Dimensional Education: The Competencies Learners Need to Succeed*” (Rubin, 2016). The title of Fadel’s book indicates that schools should provide students (actually, “learners,” masters of themselves) with “competencies” in order to succeed. The meaning of the word success ordinarily depends on context; it implies a goal one can “succeed at.” Our mythic lens hints to us that, with the goal unspecified, the chain of values has found its end, and we are homing in on the absent core of the myth.

To answer the question, “Succeed at what?” for ourselves, we can look at the body of the interview: “If designed well, curriculum can help lead to more peaceful, sustainable societies, with more economic progress and fairness, composed of people who are fulfilled and happier” (Rubin, 2016). Fadel’s vision of the good society with fulfilled and happy citizens depends on sustainability and economic progress. Despite the futuristic language that Fadel employs, his vision of the

world to come is essentially the currently-existing world, where curriculum heroically upholds the current economic system, and the economic system is king.

Fadel's confusion of students' and the economy's needs produces the strange consequences that we see in his new curriculum, precisely what Coffield et al. (2004) describe as "widespread eclecticism and deep confusion [...] of aims and purposes" (p. 128). Its complexity attests to Fadel's drive to "innovate" as much as possible—as long as the original economic hierarchy is kept intact. Fadel breaks up the titular four dimensions—knowledge, skills, character, and meta-learning—into long lists of categories. Knowledge contains the old subjects in pared-down form, and Fadel is not shy to suggest that "in Maths, we need more statistics and probabilities, and less trigonometry." In addition, "modern knowledge disciplines such as Technology & Engineering, Media, Entrepreneurship & Business, Personal Finance, Wellness, and Social Systems need to be added to respond to present and future demands." Again, Fadel stops short of addressing the question of *whose* demands. Literacy has given way to a host of "literacies" (much as competency, the basic ability to thrive in the world as a citizen, has unbundled into "competencies"): "Global Literacy, Environmental Literacy, Information Literacy, Digital Literacy, Systems Thinking, and Design Thinking." The skills dimension covers the "4 C's of Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication, and Collaboration," which will replace the 3 R's. If that weren't enough, the new curriculum includes the "Character dimension... mindfulness, curiosity, courage, resilience, ethics, and leadership" *through* the subjects—curiosity through math, ethics through biology, etc. Finally, Meta-Learning categories are the familiar metacognitive capacities as well as internalizing a "Growth Mindset."

These competencies add up to a profile of a student who is flexible, portable, and up-to-date ("literate") on business trends, the same type of worker as Fadel's ideal teacher. Not surprisingly, the current teaching force is undertrained to han-

dle this new curriculum (Rubin, 2017a). Fadel recommends “comprehensive re-training for both modernized content and engaging pedagogies” (Rubin, 2016) and encourages parents to put pressure on teachers, via administration and school boards, “to do more learning and service projects that deal with real world issues (like energy use, disaster relief, poverty, health, etc.)” (Trilling & Fadel, 2011). So far, the economic system (“world”) is king, and it uses education to provide it with workers. I doubt that Fadel himself would disagree with this—who would want an *unhealthy* economic system, unable to care for precarious future workers?

Fadel reaches outside his four dimensions and into the parental realm: “we should educate parents about parenting itself, and about the need to change both the What and the How of education in order to improve their children’s chances.” Here, families are ranked below his curriculum, which is in turn subordinate to the world/economy. This subordination stems from the absence in Fadel’s vision of any sense of a public that collectively influences “the What and the How” of public education. Such a public would have little use for an education about education (much less about parenting!), because the immanent truth of public education would be determined through contingent democratic processes, or in tense negotiation with representatives of the teaching profession. However, in Fadel’s world, experts administer workers’ and children’s human bodies. The postulation of an externalized villain is evident in this quote, in which experts can help all parents “improve their children’s chances,” not against an unjust system or even each other, but some unnamed threat *out there*. “Improving their children’s chances” speaks to the world of biological survival, and it is difficult to square this world with the peaceful, sustainable society filled with happy, fulfilled people.

While spelling out a plan in detail is not in itself obsessive, the comprehensive control that Fadel would have over students and families is a sign of an obsessive reformer. There is no end in sight to Fadel’s incursions into the psyches of stu-

dents because, like Julia Fisher only worse, Fadel does not recognize education's structural incapacity to perfectly fill society's needs or any student's needs. Fadel's overbearing curriculum leaves no room for any alienation a student would experience as a necessary structural consequence of imposing a structure on a free subject. Growth occurs in this space of alienation (McGowan, 2003), where a student can experience their dissatisfaction consciously. Unable to any find relief in this breathing room, students would be plagued by insecurity and guilt: Am I growing enough? Am I critical enough? Am I courageous enough?

Just like students, the educational profession would struggle to place a boundary between itself and the world. There is nothing wrong with teaching "real world issues (like energy use, disaster relief, poverty, health, etc.)." But the "etc." can never be closed. Fadel might feel relieved to find out that the "outmoded" subjects that schools now teach have always been outmoded. Similarly, Julia Fisher laments that "our traditional model of education has struggled to meet the needs of each individual student because it was never designed to do so" (Rubin, 2017b) and attacks the "misalignment" between higher education and industry. She assumes that the recent turn toward meeting the needs of each individual student is both a worthy one and a possible one. For all its problems with exclusion, the public under the traditional model spent a tiny fraction of today's resources on education because it respected the boundary between itself and the student. In Chapter 5, I will describe an even better alternative to simply respecting the gap: restructuring education around the structural impossibility of meeting the needs of each individual student.

3.4 The calculus of finding the right public school

With these confused, mythical ideas about educational needs in mind, we now turn to school choice. Fadel's goal is to change education universally, so he does

not talk about vouchers, Educational Savings Accounts, or any other aspects of school choice. He does not even mention learning styles in any of his Huffington Post pieces. Fadel claims he does not want to see students get “left behind” by the new realities of job automation and offshoring (Trilling & Fadel, 2011). In this view, economic realities are unquestioned and naturalized; the question is how to align schools with these realities. The title of Trilling and Fadel’s (2011) article, “I just want my kid to be happy... and successful” embodies this facile and mythical alignment. While school choice seems like an alternative to (or an escape from) Standards and Accountability, both movements rely on the same myth of success.

Like Fadel, authors who emphasize school choice obfuscate the dominance of the economy over education, but they take an opposite approach. While Fadel encourages parents to “read up on economic and workforce trends [...] on what motivates us to learn [and] on the skills most needed for our times” (Trilling & Fadel, 2011), school choice advocates position parents as the ultimate masters. The outdated school system (or unions, depending on the author) is the villain both in terms of rank and its material displacement of bodies. That is, school districts maintain a hierarchy that places themselves above both children and their families, and they have physically “trapped” (as several articles put it) students in failing schools. The heroes that will deliver students above the system are legislation, judicial decisions, and lobbies. They embody the values of school choice and access and have rightfully inserted themselves into the proper hierarchy, making sure that schools work for and are subordinate to families. This hierarchy places parents’ decisions for their kids above all. Because this position is never justified beyond that parents “know best,” one could suppose that parents are masters in this myth. However, their choices are limited by the available options. One could imagine a universe of infinitely many educational options, but we once again find ourselves in the bad infinite, in which a limiting condition will always produce

unsatisfied parents and schools that are never quite tailored enough to their children's learning styles.

We get a parent's perspective in this bad infinite in an *L.A. Times* op-ed by Myrna Castrejón, sponsored by her organization, Great Public Schools Now:

“Like many Angelenos, Myrna Castrejón is struggling with what she calls “the calculus”² of finding the right public school. It needs to be academically rigorous, first and foremost. It also needs to be the right fit for her son's learning style. Ideally, it's near their home—but also close to work.

“It's absolutely a puzzle, to line up all those elements,’ says Castrejón. ‘And the reality is, sometimes we don't get it right’” (Lambert, 2016).

Of Castrejón's criteria, only schools that match her children's learning styles can really be part of “the calculus”—the other criteria, academic rigor and proximity to home and work are universally desired. Castrejón's organization seeks legal routes to match children with their parents' preferred educational “provider,” “agnostic” (in Castrejón's words) of whether the provider is public, charter, or private. In this myth, families exercising choice rule absolutely over both their students and school districts, with the privilege of being agnostic about funding sources. Parents wield their children's learning styles as justification for their choice—without it, they would be at the mercy of a villainous bureaucracy that autonomously judges and sorts their children according to its own interests or inertia. Whatever the origins of the learning style, if it were not real, it would be necessary to invent it. Remarkably, while many articles mention learning styles, not one article in my set gives any example or explanation of learning styles outside of federally recognized special needs.

An article by Doug Tuthill, president of the nonprofit Step Up for Students, shows just how deeply the king of a myth—in this case, parental choice—can be buried under signifiers.

²Hegel himself associated Newton's infinitesimal calculus with the bad infinite!

“All of us must wrangle with complex issues that overlay public education at this key point of transition from neighborhood schools to school choice to educational choice—moving beyond just picking schools to mixing and matching all kinds of different educational programs, à la carte, to craft truly personalized educational experiences that parents deem best for their children’s needs. Finding the proper balance between government regulations and parental choice, in order to establish accountability and drive quality, is difficult in every sector, be it district, charter, or private. We have diverse opinions about how much testing, if any, should be required; whether accreditation and teacher certification bring value; what funding levels are adequate and equitable. But by focusing on our shared values and mission and engaging in respectful, fact-based dialogue, I know we’ll arrive at compromises that strengthen our programs and relationships and empower more families.

This willingness to listen and compromise is common sense to us. Why would charter and private school choice advocates not collectively embrace the goal of providing all parents with access to schools that best meet their child’s needs? Who cares if the school they choose is a traditional neighborhood school, magnet school, charter school, home school, private school, or virtual school? We just want to enable all parents to find and access the best school for their child” (Tuthill, 2018).

This passage sums up much of the discourse on school choice in several ways, and even takes it in a radical direction. First, by “moving beyond just picking schools to mixing and matching all kinds of different educational programs,” the combinatorial possibilities provide a new horizon for the bad infinite. In addition to the right educational setting, parents can now “wrangle with” the right mix of programs to “craft” their children’s menu of educational experiences. Second, like Castrejón’s article, this passage expresses an agnosticism (“who cares?”) about educational settings, and it extends it into the pedagogical realm. Matters of testing, teacher accreditation, and funding are trifling, subject to “compromise.” The diverse voices’ “common ground” has nothing to do with teaching and learning, but is simply to find ways to increase parents’ access to educational programs. Third, in a paucity of pedagogical common ground, this passage mentions “fact-based dialogue,” but leaves no comment about the common ground of these facts, all

common ground being purely strategic. How are parents to learn about their children's needs and the reasoning behind the available programs? How are they to determine the correct match? Because this question is not answered, we can conclude that parental choice is king of the myth. "Fact-based dialogue" can only mean one parent's intuition against another's, or who can craft a more convincing mythical image.³

We can really see the lack of sense in Tuthill's proposal by comparing it to a *New York Times* opinion from the initial data set that is also "agnostic about labels," with a key difference. Robin Lake argues in favor of a weighted student funding model, "sending a set amount per pupil to any public school a child attends" (Lake, 2016).

"All families deserve choices, not just the most advantaged. School leaders must be empowered to lead schools with a mission. They need to be able to hire teachers who believe in that mission, and they need control over their budget to serve their students well. Most public schools lack any real control today to innovate around their staffing, budgets and educational programs.

"Every school should be expected to grow, get support and intervention, or be replaced by another promising set of educators. No school and promising approach should be abandoned based on 'charter' or 'district' distinctions. We need to be agnostic about labels and unwavering on finding evidence-based solutions" (Lake, 2016).

Whether or not we agree with Lake's proposal, there is more sense in it than in Tuthill's call for compromise. For Lake, there is no room for (bad-)infinitely divisible, "à la carte" programs that comprise a child's "individually crafted experiences." There is a lower bound: the indivisible school with a "mission," on which its leaders make decisions about money allocation, hiring, and pedagogy. Despite their superficial similarity, Tuthill's disarticulated "fact-based dialogue" contrasts

³Further research would investigate discourse of parents describing their children's educational needs and options. My hypothesis would be that it exemplifies Lacan's "Discourse of the Capitalist," in which no Master Signifier is able to articulate signifiers to things. Traditionally, such a Master Signifier would have been propped up by our institutions, so that "needs" signified the same thing for everyone. However, in capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air," and sense is replaced by solipsism (Bryant, 2013). We should expect to see education/parenting blogs whose value is based not on any sense they transmit, but on the enjoyment in/of their images.

with Lake’s authoritative “evidence-based solutions.” While Tuthill’s agnosticism results from a landscape in which everyone is free to do their own thing, Lake’s agnosticism would be a clear result of a restructuring of school funding. Despite that a school would have to couch its mission in advertising lingo in order to fill seats, in Lake’s landscape of weighted student funding it could in principle operate under a well-defined mission that served its local community and whose pedagogy and management were aligned with this mission. Parents would not constantly be feeling like they could get a better deal at a different school, because schools could choose not to pretend they could ever perfectly meet each student’s unique learning style.

3.5 Choice as privilege and empowerment

In lieu of learning styles, in some articles, economic and racial inequality become entangled in the myth of school choice. In one *Washington Post* editorial, the editors berate new New York mayor Bill de Blasio for “dismantling the education policies of three-term mayor Michael R. Bloomberg” (*Washington Post* Editorial Board, 2015) which included an expansion of charter schools.

“We won’t romanticize the state of New York City schools when Mr. de Blasio took over; big problems endured. But reform by Mr. Bloomberg and his imaginative school chancellor, Joel Klein, had produced increases in graduation rates, an upward trend in test scores and the replacement of failed high schools with better-performing small schools. Particularly noteworthy was the success of charter schools that offered the kind of choice that better-off parents take for granted. Sadly, even that initiative is threatened; a recent report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a think tank, says school choice has suffered since Mr. Bloomberg’s departure from office” (*Washington Post* Editorial Board, 2015).

Note that what has suffered under de Blasio, and what better-off parents take for granted, is choice itself. But it is not clear whether choice is an end in itself or if it is commanded by another (no less mythic) signifier, test scores. The rest of the

article's attacks on de Blasio come from the position of test scores, as they bemoan rampant grade inflation and advancement relative to state scores.

“New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D), stung by successful union efforts to get parents to opt out of critical testing, is expected to roll back progress on teacher evaluations based partly on student achievement. The losers in all of this are students who are trapped in failing schools and saddled with ineffective teachers. That most of them are poor and minorities doesn't seem to matter to those who profess to be progressive” (*Washington Post* Editorial Board, 2015).

This quotation, which occurs in the paragraph following the previous quotation, exemplifies a confusion on the part of the Post. It fails to make any explicit connection between the ends of ameliorating poor “achievement” on test scores (caused by teachers deemed ineffective by evaluations) and school choice. The editorial takes it as given that greater access to charter schools will improve test scores, but it is not clear how choice is supposed to serve test scores. The reader may presume that, given enough access to educational choices, parents will naturally pull their children out of “failing” schools, thereby increasing the overall quality of the system. This Darwinian conception of education, driven by the complementary concepts of test scores and school choice, is properly mythical. It covers over unanswered questions of whether even the best case scenario of perfectly matching every student to their ideal school and achieving high test scores would result in a just society, “career opportunities,” or other social good. When “those who profess to be progressive” question the claims of charter schools or standardized testing, they are painted as “anti-choice,” and the myth is strengthened. While the Post acknowledges the privileges that children of rich people and white people enjoy disproportionately, it sees these privileges as an accident of our institutions, not as a defining feature.

Two other articles (Jindal, 2015; Rotherham, 2013) point out the “hypocrisy of the Left.” They both claim that leftist opponents of school choice are denying

choice to the neediest families while enjoying it for themselves; for Bobby Jindal, evidently “school choice is for rich people only” (Jindal, 2015). Jindal asserts the value of choice by pointing out that needy families lack choices. For Jindal as for the *Post*, school choice has become an end in itself rather than the heroic vector toward some other social good.

In Andrew Rotherham’s (2013) article in *Time*, (“The Bourne Hypocrisy: Matt Damon’s Peculiar School Choice”) the author talks at length about the choices Hollywood actor Matt Damon (an “anti-choice activist”) had in where he enrolled his daughters.

“When the avowedly liberal actor revealed in an interview last week that he was sending his children to private schools—despite his vocal criticism of education reform efforts and statements about his staunch public school support—it was catnip for conservatives. [...]

“In addition to the traditional and charter schools in the LA system there are Mandarin immersion schools, magnets with different focuses, and even schools that focus on activism. If none of those schools turn out to work for the Damons that’s still a powerful argument for the ideas he works against publicly: Letting parents and teachers come together to create new public schools that meet the diverse needs of students. That’s precisely the idea behind public charter schools, an idea derided at the rallies where Damon is celebrated” (Rotherham, 2013).

This passage, like others I have examined, employs the construct of needs to prop up school choice: rich people are privileged to have more options and therefore a greater chance of finding a school that meets their children’s needs. Rotherham explicitly endorses Damon’s choices—Damon is “self-avowedly progressive,” so it is fitting that he should send his daughters to one of L.A.’s progressive schools. Rotherham applauds Damon for his unwillingness to compromise and his effort in weighing all his options with his family.

“I’m a strong public school supporter and public school parent but if the schools were not working for my kids I wouldn’t hesitate to make a different choice for them. It’s too bad all parents are not similarly empowered” (Rotherham, 2013).

What Damon can afford for his daughters, says Rotherham, is what all parents deserve for their children. He concludes that “one thing [the Damons] have is choices” (Rotherham, 2013), again equating privilege with having a multitude of options. Rotherham believes it is possible and right for every child’s need to be satisfied by a particular school.

Interestingly, to Rotherham’s expressed amazement, Damon himself does not view his privilege as a matter of choice: “Sending our kids in my family to private school was a big, big, big deal. And it was a giant family discussion. But it was a circular conversation, really, because ultimately we don’t have a choice” (Rotherham, 2013). Damon toured the public school system and “told the *Guardian* that there were no longer public schools progressive enough for his family so private was the only choice” (Rotherham, 2013). Evidently, Damon does not see himself as an “empowered parent,” or rather he is empowered in the Kantian sense: enabled to follow the path of his conscience. He is aware that his daughters’ schools will not provide a perfectly satisfactory educational product. “I mean, I pay for a private education and I’m trying to get the one that most matches the public education that I had” (Aitkenhead, 2013, the original *Guardian* interview). The private schools will provide him a space to “agitate,” that is, to continue both his political and parental struggles. That political space, in which actors shape the meanings of education through public contestation, is what Damon would have for all parents.

From all these examples, we can see how choice functions as a stand-in for political power, the very Barthesian definition of a myth. Believing they are empowered by choice, Myrna Castrejón, Jennifer Lake, the editors of the *Washington Post*, Doug Tuthill, Bobby Jindal, and Andrew Rotherham strive to increase parents’ access to choices while failing to see that a more diverse menu of choices sets them on a course toward the bad infinites of matching learning styles and improving test scores. Choice advocates often bemoan the “one-size-fits-all” ap-

proach (Whitmire, 2018 [*The 74 Million*]; Wolk, 2013) of public school advocates like Matt Damon, believing that opposing school choice means opposing experimental or laboratory schools. But, I argue that experimental schools have essentially nothing to do with school choice or increasing the diversity of opportunities. Not driven solely by “successes and failures,” these types of schools enable researchers and the public to observe qualitatively original educational products (curriculums, settings, activities) whose meanings can be contested in the professional and political fields and feed back into those fields. By the same token, all schools are experimental to some degree, because the professionals who run them and the public are constantly involved in this contestation. The practice of reflecting on these products and interactions puts the project of public education overall in the category of the true infinite. By contrast, the landscape of school choice advocated by the *Washington Post* would care only about quantitative data (i.e., test scores) whose qualitative bases are often ignored (covered over by the sheer myth of testing). Rather than debate the meanings generated by this data, the public “vote with their feet,” and the meanings of a school’s products are reductively determined before they even enter the political field. The myths of school choice, needs, learning styles, testing, and empowerment enable this reduction by focusing the public’s attention and resources on the impossible bad infinities and away from difficult, authentic political engagement on the question of the value of education (what it can mean for us) and how we must change our subjectivities (what we can mean to it).

Chapter 4

The Ineffective Teacher

In this chapter, I will critically analyze mainstream news discourses about the Standards and Accountability reform movement using a mythological framework and continuing with the method of the previous chapter. I will identify the myth of the ineffective teacher, a figure that galvanizes multiple interests in society, lending them the guise of a social movement. The myth of the ineffective teacher performs a cohesive function by organizing the enjoyment of many diverse interests. It enables policymakers, researchers, activist journalists, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and parents to deal with the deep antagonisms that affect all aspects of American education: funding, instructional and non-instructional talk, assumptions about students and their families, testing, and more. These actors' activities are organized in a way that reproduces the ineffective teacher even as they seek to eliminate it. They in turn reproduce themselves as a cohesive society or political movement with a common mission or target, even if their villain the ineffective teacher is vaguely defined.

While myths can provide a fertile ground on which diverse voices can make meaning of and change their conditions, this chapter will demonstrate the conditions that make the ground of the ineffective teacher infertile. Unlike a true social movement, the eradication of the ineffective teacher does not provide a usable fo-

cus for social change. Following the infinite path toward the ineffective teacher brings us no closer to the goal of eliminating it. While the power of policymakers, journalists, and even parents may increase through the promotion of the ineffective teacher myth, it comes at the expense of their power as citizens.

I will start by outlining the figure of the ineffective teacher. Then, I will show how a discourse can undermine its opposition by appropriating its tropes. I will show how a popular news website, *The Seventy Four*, uses the figure of the *effective* teacher in archetypal Barthesian fashion to depoliticize education. The remainder of the chapter will hinge around the *Vergara v. California* decision, which ruled that state statutes were violating the Equal Protection clause by funneling bad teachers to poor and minority students, and its reversal. Finally, I will show how myths can use progressive images and conciliatory language to convey a reactionary message and keep us all working toward a goal without making any headway.

4.1 Constitution of the myth

My process of identifying the crisis of each article in the data set resulted in several categories, each deserving its own study: lack of resources, lack of teacher preparedness, inequality of access and opportunity, and others. The present chapter focuses on the critical frame of the ineffective teacher, which first arose in my early data collection in this 2015 quotation from the *Los Angeles Times*:

“Teachers get complacent, and there is no accountability, so they kind of do what they want because they think parents don’t care. I care,” said Welton, an executive assistant at a venture capital firm. “There is no way my kid is going to be prepared for college unless [teachers] do a little bit better” (Torres, 2015).

The teacher is constructed as having an inherent entropic *complacency*. Inherently ineffective teachers will perform unacceptably unless parents hold them account-

able. The crisis is that the large number of ineffective teachers is shutting children out of college and careers. In this time of crisis, the system rewards complacency by making ineffective teachers difficult to fire. Parents, reformers, and their advocates can heroically impose order in a number of ways: better tests of teacher quality, increased legal capacity to implement them, and tying test results to hiring, firing, and layoff procedures. The fact that the system is not working means that the last ineffective teacher has yet to be removed. Some reformers admit there are other causes of the crisis, but the main cause is teacher ineffectiveness. They basically agree that when children no longer have ineffective teachers they will be sufficiently and equitably prepared for college. College and career readiness is the myth's *logical endpoint*: while signifiers usually refer to other signifiers for their justification, college and career readiness evidently needs no justification. The necessity for college and career readiness is simply the reality of the world we live in. The crisis of the ineffective teacher is a crisis for college and career readiness, making it the king of the myth.

Using Bennett's four biases, we can find common structural features across stories. They will show how the mythic crisis of the ineffective teacher forms the a priori basis of questions pertaining to school reform. Our starting point will be the very clear expression of outrage from the Governor of New York at a discrepancy between state reading tests (which were very low) and measures of teacher effectiveness (which were very high):

“In New York last year, about 99 percent of the teachers were rated effective while only 38 percent of high school graduates are ready for college or careers,’ [New York Governor Cuomo] wrote in an op-ed article in *Newsday* this month. ‘How can that be?’ (During his State of the State address, he was more blunt, calling it ‘baloney’)” (Taylor, 2015).

The question, “How can that be?” and the charge of “baloney” can be read as honest expressions of dissatisfaction with the symbolic authority and demands for

it to account for itself. So where does myth enter Cuomo's discussion? Cuomo immediately covers over his dissatisfaction with a proposal to "reduce the weight of principals' observations to just 15 percent of a rating. The judgment of an independent evaluator from outside the school would make up 35 percent. Fifty percent would be based on how much students improved, or slipped, on state exams" (Taylor, 2015). Cuomo's proposed measures imply that the fault lies in principals' observations, because the ineffective teacher must be the cause of poor preparedness. By increasing the weight of "independent evaluators" and covering over the baloney, Cuomo sustains the figure of the villainous ineffective teacher and prevents a painful encounter with the question of school ineffectiveness and inequities. Cuomo could have elaborated his initial outrage differently: How can so many kids be unprepared for college and careers when we found all our teachers to be effective? A question like this could have led Cuomo to investigate the causes of poor student preparedness and encounter the system's actual embodied priorities for its students.

Cuomo's avoidance does not only benefit him. His proposal cannot but resonate with caring parents like Welton, who already perceive ineffective teachers causing the crisis. The alternative of Cuomo fully accepting the discrepancy and using it to investigate the problem would seem to Welton like a dereliction of duty. A cohesion between citizens like Welton and politicians like Cuomo is enabled by the ineffective teacher myth. Because school reform's cohesive power depends on the externalized object of the ineffective teacher, this object has become the movement's central axiom.

While Cuomo converts his dissatisfaction into an executive proposal, others respond with rationalizations. Activist journalists seek explanations for the ineffective teacher's cover-up. Anderson (2013) argues that we should not be surprised at the speciousness of evaluations: self-interested principals "are loath to give teach-

ers low marks.” Taylor’s (2015) article echoes this rationalization: “James N. Baron, a professor at the Yale School of Management, said that in the corporate world, it was widely known that supervisors were biased toward rating their employees highly.” By suggesting that principals could be shielding ineffective teachers from punishment, Baron perpetuates the belief in the existence of the ineffective teacher. Taylor offers some counterbalance to the cold, hard fact that the teacher ratings are biased, but all it serves is to further incriminate authority figures and strengthen the myth:

“John Bierwirth, the superintendent of the Herricks school district, also on Long Island, where 93 percent of the teachers were rated highly effective, said that in devising his district’s evaluation system, he had intentionally tried to create a cushion to counterbalance the portion of the ratings based on test scores, which for an individual teacher can bounce up and down from year to year.

“‘I wasn’t gaming the system,’ Dr. Bierwirth said, ‘but I was trying to protect teachers from whimsical results’” (Taylor, 2015).

Whimsical results or not, the fact is Dr. Bierwirth *is* “gaming the system.” Or, at least, delegitimizing it: the ineffective teacher can easily hide among the “protected” teachers, regardless if they deserve it. Further counter-rationalizations are offered by another superintendent:

“‘If you’re a parent, would you put your child with a developing or ineffective teacher?’ asked William Johnson, the superintendent in Rockville Centre, on Long Island, which placed not a single teacher in either category. (While, by law, individual teacher ratings are not made public, parents can gain access to the rating of their child’s teacher.)

“‘You have to think about the impact that that has not only on the psyche of a teacher, but also the relationship between a district and its community,’ Dr. Johnson said” (Taylor, 2015).

Regardless whether the reader is sympathetic with a school’s reputation, the teacher’s psyche, or community relations, Superintendent Johnson’s words call into question the validity of any evaluation based on the judgment of engaged but all-

too-human observers. The ineffective teacher perpetually lurks under these well-meaning but duped administrators. The only apparent antidote to the ineffective teacher is the cold, objective science of school improvement based on testing and enforced by “independent evaluators.” Unfortunately, as we will see, this approach will no more effectively eradicate the ineffective teacher than “soft” administrators like Dr. Bierwith and Dr. Johnson.

After seeing that many of the articles in my general search dealt with ineffective teachers, I decided to follow the thread by doing a web search for “teachers rated highly despite test scores.” Two more articles turned up in this thread (Anderson, 2013; Harris, 2014) that follow the same structure as in (Taylor, 2015):

1. A stark vignette of the crisis (the inability of the system to account for itself, the persistence of ineffective teachers).
2. Political actors who are courageously fighting the crisis (Gov. Cuomo, “caring” parents like Welton).
3. Weak rationalizations by so-called experts.
4. A vague sense that the problem is being handled by someone, which leaves the reader’s need for reassurance fundamentally unsatisfied.

Jenny Anderson’s *New York Times* article, “Curious Grade for Teachers: Nearly All Pass” (Anderson, 2013), is structured most similarly to the one by (Taylor, 2015). According to Anderson, after reports across states showed that very few teachers earned the label “ineffective,” a panic erupted among the school reform advocates.

“In Florida, 97 percent of teachers were deemed effective or highly effective in the most recent evaluations. In Tennessee, 98 percent of teachers were judged to be ‘at expectations.’

“In Michigan, 98 percent of teachers were rated effective or better.

“Advocates of education reform concede that such rosy numbers, after many millions of dollars developing the new systems and thousands of hours of training, are worrisome.

“‘It is too soon to say that we’re where we started and it’s all been for nothing,’ said Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a research and policy organization. ‘But there are some alarm bells going off’ (Anderson, 2013).

Anderson quotes several other reformers and school administrators who believe more teachers should be coming up unsatisfactory in the ratings, and she mentions cases where teachers cheated. Although reform advocates may view the report as bad news, it is actually the very news that would sustain them as reformers. The millions of dollars and thousands of hours spent on developing new systems are not wasted; they are justified by the evident cunning of the problem, now demanding even more money and time. Fortunately, Jacobs is up to the task: “There’s a real culture shift that has to occur and there’s a lot of evidence that that hasn’t occurred yet” (Anderson, 2013). The culture shift Jacobs calls for is toward fully implementing the central dogma of Standards and Accountability—focusing on the eradication of the ineffective teacher.

This heroic undertaking is propped up by the usual false hero, the teacher union:

“Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said that even though the data from these systems ‘was not ready for prime time,’ it proved what she had long argued: That the majority of teachers are very good.

“‘Maybe this information will debunk the myth about bad teachers,’ she said” (Anderson, 2013).

Though Weingarten’s remarks are presented in an unbiased way, they can serve only as an obstacle to the heroes’ action—with the “myth about bad teachers” debunked, who will act? The article ends on an upbeat note, stating that, even in states where a couple percent of teachers are deemed incompetent, that still

translates into hundreds of incompetent teachers leaving the workforce. “There’s a possibility, a real possibility, that students will have a more effective teacher,” (Anderson, 2013) says Michigan Education Department’s executive director for the Bureau of Assessment and Accountability.

An article by Elizabeth Harris follows the above structure, although Harris devotes more column-inches to justifying why students with such great teachers can be scoring so low on reading tests.

““These kids live a life where their best friend may have been murdered last week, or a horrible abusive incident may have happened at home the night before the test,’ said Michael A. Rebell, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University.

““You’ve got to look at class size; you’ve got to look at resources in a school,’ Mr. Rebell said. ‘If you have 40 kids in a classroom with all kinds of problems and they have no services, then a great teacher can’t do much’ (Harris, 2014).

No matter how sympathetic the reader is to this dose of reality, the fact of the crisis remains. Harris’s title, “Critics question high ratings on teacher evaluations while students test poorly,” and the leading paragraphs that outline the crisis, are primary. The remaining part, which contains some nuance, is secondary. These justifications do not dilute the crisis; on the contrary, they give it more urgency. The fact that Michael A. Rebell is not the hero of the myth only heightens the fact that Mario Cuomo is.

In each article covering this story in the *New York Times* (Anderson, 2013; Harris, 2014; Taylor, 2015), the first half presents, with little to no historical background, the crisis of the ineffective teacher through the desperate voices of parents, administrators, and reform advocates, while the second half presents the tempered speech—rationalizations, justifications, “baloney”—of well-meaning but ultimately corrupt authorities. Readers will breathe a (very tentative) sigh of relief

knowing that Very Important People are dealing with the problem, while the ineffective teacher lurks despite their efforts.

I also include in this analysis an article by Loewus (2017) in *Education Week*, because it is a more extreme version of Harris's article, focusing entirely on principals' rationalizations of high teacher evaluations. Amazingly, the description of the crisis is almost—but not quite—elided.

“Principals continue to rate nearly all teachers as “effective,” despite states' efforts in recent years to make evaluations tougher, two new studies show.

“And there's good evidence that those scores are inflated: When principals are asked their opinions of teachers in confidence and with no stakes attached, they're much more likely to give harsh ratings, the researchers found” (Loewus, 2017).

Is the crisis merely the discrepancy between principals' ratings with high stakes versus without? Indeed, this discrepancy is asymmetric: according to one voice in the article, the low stakes allow the principal's “true assessment” to come to light, while the high stakes are false.

“‘The stakes here are really important,’ said Grissom [an associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University]. ‘When they talk to the researchers, there are no stakes attached—we're not going to do anything, it doesn't count for anything.’ It makes sense a principal would in that case give ‘a true assessment,’ he said” (Loewus, 2017).

With all teachers getting good marks, there is no way to tell the good from the bad. However, the article neglects the crucial step of explaining *why this is a problem*, as though the reader is already alarmed that districts cannot tell good teachers from bad. Loewus does mention that principals do still differentiate among teachers; they just are splitting them between “effective” and “highly effective.” Grissom admits that “there is a difference between a teacher rating of effective and highly effective. [...] It's just not the level of differentiation that when these systems

rolled out *people thought they would see*" (Loewus, 2017, my emphasis). And there, in the final line of the article, the article finally alludes to the public's perception of a crisis of bad teachers. This quote destroys all the *understanding* built up by the articles list of rationalizations, which cannot remove the kernel of the crisis.

I will close this section by sharing a "counterexample" to the above thread that came up in the "ineffective teacher" search. A *New York Times* article titled "Teach Your Teachers Well" (Polakow-Suransky, 2016) begins with the stance that Gov. Cuomo's move to suspend the use of state tests to evaluate teachers was "a wise first step, but it won't improve our schools unless we go further and build a professionalized system of support that views teachers as learners and challenges them to improve their classroom practices." He argues for more high quality training for teachers, a longer residency paid by public funds, more time for teachers to observe each other, and more power to principals to evaluate teachers. This article demonstrates that an alternative to a myth need not be some kind of reasoned argument devoid of myth—according to Laclau, such a thing would be impossible. Rather, the alternative to a myth is *a better myth*, with a more alarming crisis, a more captivating victim/lost object, a more relatable hero, and a more outrageous villain. Polankow-Suransky delivers these elements by naming several crises and associated victims: "a crisis of confidence for parents, teachers and principals" means our data has to be made meaningful, because right now the entire process is "a joke." Second, a crisis of "not enough in-depth learning" indicates an object that other developed countries enjoy but we do not. Third, they use metaphors of stagnation and death: "When teachers don't examine students' work together and discuss how to improve their teaching, they stop growing. When teachers stop growing, classrooms become dead zones where everyone is watching the clock." The antidote to this decay, teachers learning together, infuses "lively thinking into their classrooms."

What sets Polankow-Suransky's article apart from many left-leaning opinions is his repeated calls for heroic action. Plenty of articles decry the millions of dollars wasted on meaningless tests that demoralize the public and degrade the teaching profession, and in doing so they deprive the public of a means to enjoy. Polankow-Suransky agrees that millions are wasted, but, by calling on the public to invest those millions toward teacher training and professional development, i.e. to sacrifice, he offers a path of enjoyment.

With the myth's basic dynamics outlined, we can see how its emphasis on eradicating the villain is self-defeating. In Chapter 3, I argued that shopping for schools provides a source of satisfaction for parents. I located an impossible object that was generating this satisfaction: the perfect school tailored to their child's individual needs and "learning style." Parents are happy to make whatever sacrifices necessary to achieve this perfect school, and as citizens they advocate for more time and money toward researching and developing of new systems, increasing teacher training, and hiring the best of the best. But the search for the perfect school can never end, because research will always discover finer and finer divisions of "learning styles," parents will realize incongruences between their child's learning style and their school's curriculum, and the shopping will reiterate. In the remainder of this chapter, I will show that the same infinite mechanism is driving the Standards and Accountability movement.

4.2 Kids not widgets

In this section, I highlight a strange dynamic where a bad infinite can appropriate its own opposition. While standardized tests are the basic mechanism for rooting out the ineffective teacher, the idea that standardized tests are inadequate has attained a certain consensus among advocates of Standards and Accountability as well as their opponents. In order to halt the billowing bad infinite of Standards

and Accountability, some of its critics have pointed out the inherent impossibility of measuring every aspect of every student's and teacher's performance. Unfortunately for these critics, this tactic is showing a limited effect: the pro-Standards and Accountability discourse easily appropriates the impossibility of testing.

When asked what warnings he would heed from his opponents, Bruce Reed of the results-driven Eli Broad Foundation replied: "I would agree with those who say not everything can be measured. We have to measure things that are measurable, and remember we are dealing with kids, not widgets" (Morrison, 2014). While Reed may be appearing to concede what is due to his critics, he is actually augmenting his status. This tactic is structured similarly to MasterCard's "priceless" campaign: "MasterCard is perfectly willing to grant that some elements of life cannot be figured in terms of the market. What is priceless today, one can be sure, will have a price tomorrow, when something else will miraculously become priceless" (McGowan, 2016). The fact that "not everything can be measured" provides an infinite reserve of elements of academic performance that someday will be measurable. The same endless increment is captured in the following news excerpt:

"Roberta Salin, a white voter in Los Angeles County, said standardized testing has created a culture at schools that focuses on learning basic knowledge and neglects other relevant material because it is not included in exams.

"'Do we need testing? Of course we do, but not in the way it's done now,' said Salin, a retired information technology director. 'I have two sons who graduated and went to college, but they'll be the first to tell you that they didn't learn history until they got to college because everything [in high school] is geared toward the next test'" (Torres, 2015).

Salin believes we need testing, but done in a more encompassing way to include important subjects like history. Tomorrow, it may be possible for a test to measure the actual learning of history in a nuanced and informed way, much as today's

tests do a much better job of testing abstract mathematical reasoning than they used to. At that future moment, the horizon of testability will have shifted incrementally into a target that is unthinkable today (perhaps into Charles Fadel's "character dimension"). Although Salin is talking about curriculum and not individual teachers, the always out-of-reach realm of the untestable fits the logic of the ineffective teacher. Students' inherent untestability guarantees the ineffective teacher's continuing existence.

4.3 *The Seventy Four*

In this section, I examine some of the tautological uses of the ineffective teacher myth, drawing from Roland Barthes. One of the consistent proponents of Standards and Accountability is a website headed by former CNN anchor Campbell Brown called *The Seventy Four*. I first came across this website while searching for articles for this dissertation about teacher accountability in *The Huffington Post*. An article by Griffin announced the creation of a new group that is going to lead a new fight for education.

"We will fiercely challenge those forces within the education establishment who impede innovation in our schools and who protect and defend inequality and institutional failure,' she [Campbell Brown] wrote. [...]

"Brown responded that she blamed the teachers' unions for fighting efforts 'to change laws that are anachronistic, that everybody thinks need to change. It comes down to what your priorities are.'" [...]

"We are long overdue for an honest conversation about what works and what doesn't work,' Brown said in a press release. 'That's why we started The Seventy Four, a newsroom with an unapologetic point of view that will serve as a platform for those without a voice'" (Griffin, 2015).

From this story, we get a sense of a perceived crisis: a voice is being silenced. As a result of a purposeful distortion or deception, the public does not know

“what works and what doesn’t (work)”—a phrase echoed by Bruce Reed in the Patt Morrison interview. On *The Seventy Four*, the crisis is constructed as a direct effect of failing to heed the warnings of *A Nation at Risk*, of prioritizing a kind of political correctness (bowing to teacher unions and resisting privatization) over common sense standards. The charge of “anachronistic laws” implies that laws have lost their ability to reflect our changing values. The hero that will restore our “priorities,” placing common sense over bowing to interests, is an “unapologetic point of view,” a declaration of the new values, and the political tools to reinscribe them into law.

Some puzzling aspects of *The Seventy Four* can be brought out by examining its mission statement:

“The 74 is a non-profit, non-partisan news site covering education in America. Our public education system is in crisis. In the United States, less than half of our students can read or do math at grade-level, yet the education debate is dominated by misinformation and political spin. Our mission is to lead an honest, fact-based conversation about how to give America’s 74 million children under the age of 18 the education they deserve.

“Our stories are backed by investigation, expertise, and experience. The 74’s reporting aims to challenge the status quo, expose corruption and inequality, and champion the heroes who bring positive change to our schools.

“There are 74 million children in America. There are 74 million reasons to talk about education. Join the conversation” (“About”, 2018).

When I first explored the news and opinion articles, videos, and “flash cards,” what stuck out was that most of the articles seemed to avoid talking about the crux of education, however defined—teaching and learning, democratic citizenship, career preparation, apprenticeship, etc.—focusing on legislative and financial aspects. For example, one article by Carnock (2016) claims to explain (and was titled) “3 Ways Washington State Leads the Nation for English Language Learners.” What is going on in Washington’s classrooms that benefits ELL’s more than other

states? But this question is rephrased somewhat in the body of the article: it introduces a new bill that “addresses ELLs uniquely in three big ways” (Carnock, 2016). And these three ways are the usual: “1. More qualified teachers,” “2. Closer state monitoring of student performance,” and “3. More administrator training = more valuable feedback (and evaluations)” (Carnock, 2016). For all the reader knows, these three “ways” may describe practices that have something to do with the quality of ELL services (which is why I posit them as signifieds in Table 4.1), but these are not explained. The article is not what it claims to be, an investigation of practice; it is an endorsement of a legislative tool. Thus, we have another legislative “solution” without an adequately articulated problem and very little information about how learners of English are taught (the article merely names the distinction of “dual language programming” vs. “sheltered instruction” without explanation).

1. Washington State’s ELL services: dual language programming, qualified teachers, state monitoring, etc.	2. The actual practices that address ELLs under these headings	
3. Sign / I. THE “LISTICLE”-STYLE ARTICLE TITLE		II. THE NEW BILL ENDORSED BY CARNOCK
III. MYTHIC SIGN		

Table 4.1: *The Seventy Four’s modus operandi*

The Seventy Four carries out a parallel flattening in its unconventional use of “honest conversation,” i.e., not of citizens struggling to enunciate a political will in some form. Instead, a caricature of these terms was presented by “flash cards” and other bite-sized info, which tell parents what *they need to know* about a range of issues, including Common Core standards, charter schools, bullying, teacher hiring practices, tech-driven fads like “changemaker education,” quantitative pol-

icy instruments, candidates' pledges to set aside \$2 billion... all the conceivable questions besides the most obvious: What is the crisis? What is the thing that children are lacking generally, and that some groups of children are lacking especially? The crisis is articulated only mythically: "less than half of our students can read or do math at grade-level." This statement, meant to stand on its own, has the form of a fact, but, like Barthes' French soldier, it is being put in the service of something else. It is one of the basic vectors of a space of objectivity. The signifier "grade-level" does not require other signifiers for its definition, but simply defines itself tautologically.

To understand *The Seventy Four's* political orientation, we can invoke a distinction between what Harman (2014) calls Truth Politics and Power Politics. The former style of politics asserts that "the truth is basically already known, but is prevented from becoming reality by various social, economic, or ideological obstructions" (Harman, 2014). The concept of truth in *The 74 Million* articles is divided. On the one hand, there are expressions of will, such as "laws, that are anachronistic, that everybody thinks need to change," the notion of "priorities," and the mission to "serve as a platform for those without a voice." Brown assumes that there is a political truth—the fundamental right of all children to a quality education—and the task is to align the laws with this truth. On the other hand, lumped in with truth is the desire for facts or knowledge: "We are long overdue for an honest conversation about what works and what doesn't work [...] That's why we started *The Seventy Four*" (Griffin, 2015). It is as if the unobstructed facts themselves will set the priorities straight. Thus there is a strange loop in her style of Truth Politics, in which facts create themselves and inform correct action. The latter style, Power Politics, is the conversion of political action into *knowledge*: "Might makes Right" (Harman, 2014). Brown overtly opposes this orientation, which she identifies as the source of "misinformation" and "spin," because "an

honest conversation” is possible only when we all perceive an object in the same way.

The source of *The Seventy Four's* mythmaking is its confusion of the two orientations, Truth Politics and Power Politics. Brown's disavowal of Power Politics under an assumption of objectivity leave her no recourse but accusations of deception, implying that her opponents are selfishly working against the common interest. She reduces her opponents' and their supporters' interests to a willful ignorance of “what works and what doesn't.” By disavowing Power Politics, she cannot recognize her own political incursions, or that *The Seventy Four's* “honest conversations” are quite asymmetric. In the strange loop of facts begetting facts, we can detect a mythic image that *The Seventy Four* seeks to preserve, a naturalized image of something like *quality* or *value*, which are actually hard-fought political concepts. In Barthes' terms, Brown has “abolished the complexity” of these terms, giving them “the simplicity of essences,” and thus they do not require explanation; they “go without saying,” they are simply what “every child deserves.” Throughout *The Seventy Four*, the image of quality is closely tied to the concept/image of equity. Equity in education, another political ideal undergoing constant struggle to the present day, is suffering the same kind of depoliticization as quality. Equity and quality are the two master terms that define our post-No Child Left Behind educational crisis, and the ineffective teacher is the link between them. In many *Seventy Four* articles, the two terms are fused together into the crisis of access as the question becomes, how do we ensure that no group receives less than a quality education?

Reading through articles on *The Seventy Four*, I landed on an opinion piece by Mendoza (2016) called “Illinois' ‘Untapped Potential Act’ and Recognizing That Every Child Deserves a Bite at the Apple,” and so, by analyzing it for its mythic content, we can observe a very Barthesian depoliticization of teaching. Mendoza

begins by congratulating this year's winner of the Golden Apple, a prestigious annual award given to one Illinois teacher. The recent recipient teaches Honors Biology and AP Environmental Science at a prestigious Chicago magnet school with selective enrollment. After this introduction, the myth enters: "Every child deserves access to excellent teachers like Mr. Katz, equitable access to the testing to gain entry into selective enrollment schools like Whitney Young and advanced coursework like Honors Biology and AP Environmental Science" (Mendoza, 2016). The article ends with an endorsement of the "Untapped Potential Act," which "reforms the identification system for the state's gifted programs, allowing more low-income and minority students to gain access to the educational opportunities they need and deserve" (Mendoza, 2016). The fusion of equity and quality is embodied in this endorsement.

There is nothing extraordinary about this short article, but we can perceive in it the same treatment of teachers as in much of *The Seventy Four's* content. The effect is the same as Barthes' mythologized black French soldier: a signifier is robbed of its being, naturalized, and put to some use that is quite unrelated to that teacher. Mendoza's article gives no indication of why Mr. Katz deserved the award, or why every student deserves "access" to teachers like him other than that he won an award. What does it mean to be an "excellent teacher like Mr. Katz"? But Mr. Katz's "excellence" needs no definition, because he and it are the very definition of equality to which low-income and minority students should aspire to gain access. We can see how he is "depoliticized by a general metalanguage which is trained to celebrate things, and no longer to 'act them'" (Barthes, 1991, p. 143).

Mendoza's article shows how Barthes' often-criticized talk of the true language of "man the maker" could be rethought in quantitative terms. Barthes' mythic image is a signifier not lacking any special essence, but with a comparative lack of articulations to other cultural signifiers. It borrows heavily from its content with-

1. Mr. Katz, winner of the Golden Apple	2. Presumably, a great teacher that deserves recognition
3. Sign /	
I. MR. KATZ, WINNER OF THE GOLDEN APPLE	II. EQUAL ACCESS TO GIFTED PROGRAMS
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 4.2: Mr. Katz and the Golden Apple as mythic signifiers of equity and quality

out interacting with the neighborhood of signifiers of this content. By contrast, Barthes' true signs of "man the maker," of the worker, are more "real" because they can support and be contested by other signifiers. In a similar way, Mendoza's celebratory use of Mr. Katz is exploiting the wealth of articulations that the Golden Apple Award and other markers of the profession carry. In the same way that Barthes' soldier oscillates between its hard-fought meanings and French imperialism/equality, Mendoza's "Mr. Katz" oscillates between a well-articulated level and a mythic level, or between the (presumably, contestably) good teaching that earned him the award and Mendoza's vision for equal access. Mr. Katz is now a black box, a function of equitable access. In its use of the "excellent" teacher, this article prevents Mr. Katz and his presumed "excellence" to be disarticulated, hashed out, and rearticulated in the symbolic field of political sense.

As I said, there is nothing extraordinary in saying that all students deserve access to award-winning teachers. The point of this analysis is not to find fault with Mendoza's rhetoric, implying that his goal should have been to define "excellence." By using the "excellent" teacher in an unproblematic, commonsense way, Mendoza has constructed an argument that is impossible to counter. Who would argue that low-income and minority students *do not* deserve excellent teachers that win awards? From this frame, Mendoza's endorsement of the Untapped Potential Act is appealing. There is nothing deceptive in Mendoza's endorsement of a bill

by stapling to it a stock image of a Golden Apple recipient; as Barthes pointed out, myth does not aim to deceive. The problem with Mendoza's article and *The Seventy Four* overall is that, by mining teachers for their presumed excellence in order to endorse legislation, they prevent an "honest conversation" of what actually excellent teaching could mean. The Mr. Katz-symbol would not be so problematic if it carried a more robust set of associations. In that case, I might have analogized Mendoza's use of Mr. Katz to a purposefully articulated illustration rather than a stock image. As the question of excellence has been perpetually deferred throughout the crisis of the ineffective teacher, it is this very connectedness that has eroded. In its disconnected, depoliticizing, mythic use of the teacher-image toward endorsing the Untapped Potential Act, Mendoza's article is the rule among articles in *The Seventy Four*.

4.4 *Vergara v. California*

The remaining discussion about the ineffective teacher will center on a number of opinions on the 2014 *Vergara v. California* decision. I was interested in following this thread because the case was mentioned in 6 out of the 100 articles in my original "threadless" sample, which is significant considering my search terms were "school reform" and "teacher accountability." After reading these articles, the myth soon became visible to the analysis.

In the original Vergara decision, Judge Rolf M. Treu ruled that several of the state's statutes on teacher tenure, hiring, and firing were unconstitutional because they denied students equal protection under the law. These statutes, which allowed the state to retain "grossly ineffective" teachers, impacted poor and minority students disproportionately because they were more likely to be assigned a "grossly ineffective" teacher. While prior cases going back to *Brown v. Board* "addressed the issue of a lack of **equality** of educational **opportunity** [...] here

this Court is directly faced with issues that compel it to apply these constitutional principles to the **quality** of the educational experience” (*Vergara v. California*, 2014, p. 2, emphasis in original). This judgment was not about “opportunity,” but about “quality”—that condition which makes a teacher “a critical, if not the most important, component of **success** of a child’s in-school educational experience” (*Vergara v. California*, 2014, p. 7, emphasis in original). We may be tempted to think that this shift from “opportunity” to “quality” represents a shift towards a more holistic and less transactional view of education—“opportunity” representing education’s “exchange value” and “quality” representing its “use value.” However, what “shocks the conscience” for Judge Treu is that “a single year in a classroom with a grossly ineffective teacher costs students \$1.4 million in lifetime earnings per classroom,” (*Vergara v. California*, 2014, p. 7) and “students in LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] who are taught by a teacher in the bottom 5% of competence lose 9.54 months of learning in a single year compared to students with average teachers” (p. 7). Thus, “quality” of education here clearly means quantity, and this reduction is one species of mythic speech that Roland Barthes identifies: “by reducing any quality to quantity, myth economizes all intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply” (Barthes, 1991, p. 154). With such a reduced concept of the range of interactions between teacher and students, the “grossly ineffective” teacher has a powerful presence that is perfectly at home in the regime of common sense.

For Ernesto Laclau, myth not only “constitutes a concrete ‘order’ [but also] represents the very form of order (or fullness) at the same time. The more this second dimension predominates, the more the mythical space will become an imaginary horizon” (Laclau, 1990, p. 79). We can detect that the ineffective teacher has become the “imaginary horizon” of school reform—the limit of what reforming schools even means. The *Wall Street Journal* lauded the ruling, noting that

1. Ineffective teaching	2. Reduced quality of educational experiences
3. Sign /	
I. "INEFFECTIVE TEACHING" UNDER PRE-VERGARA RULES	II. REDUCED LIFETIME EARNINGS THAT "SHOCK THE CONSCIENCE"
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 4.3: The mythic reduction of quality to quantity, the economization of intelligence

“Education Secretary Arne Duncan praised the decision as ‘a mandate to fix’ educational inequities and opportunity to ‘build a new framework for the teaching profession’” (“A school reform landmark”, 2014). The “very form of order,” the teaching profession itself, will be re-formed around rules that dictate how teachers can be hired and fired.

1. Fixing the educational system, equity	2. Government statutes, professional development, societal pressure, judicial decisions
3. Sign /	
I. FIXING THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN THE ERA OF VERGARA V. CALIFORNIA	II. HIRING AND FIRING RULES, REMOVING THE INEFFECTIVE TEACHER
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 4.4: “A new framework for the teaching profession”

This myth is strengthened by the finding that “grossly ineffective” teachers are funneled downward to poor and minority students, a fact that neatly addresses the reigning frame of civil rights: ensuring equal opportunity and “quality” (reduced to quantity) for all students. Remove the ineffective teachers, and justice is served; fail to remove ineffective teachers, and prepare for public outrage. The *Journal*

threatens: “If state governments don’t act, disadvantaged students now have a claim to petition the judiciary to protect their rights as much as in the days of Jim Crow” (“A school reform landmark”, 2014).¹ A clear association, a metaphor, is drawn here between the stain of the ineffective teacher and that of the “separate but equal” doctrine. We should take this association seriously, because its effective linkage of the ineffective teacher to Jim Crow severely constrains how inequity in education is attacked. “The condition for the emergence of an imaginary is the metaphorization of the literal content of a particular social demand” (Laclau, 1990, p. 64). This imaginary “is a horizon: it is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures the field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object” (p. 64). The task of civil rights in education, which used to encompass a lot of different things, was refocused onto the ineffective teacher, and this became the condition of possibility for equal opportunity and access to jobs. We need to ask whether the constraints of the ineffective teacher are workable, and, if not, can we select new ones via a better myth?

4.5 The *Vergara* appeals ruling

To begin, we can examine the successful reversal of the *Vergara* ruling. The reason why the ruling was promptly reversed is that it failed to locate the source of the inequity. In the appellate court’s opinion, “plaintiffs failed to show that the statutes themselves make any certain group of students more likely to be taught by ineffective teachers than any other group of students,” (*Vergara v. California* Appellate Decision, 2016, p. 627). For appellate judge P. J. Boren, the lesson of the

¹Here, the *Journal* cynically avoids taking a position on whether disadvantaged students are justified in their claim. If a court finds their claim unjustified, the movement will die in its tracks. But, if they are justified, then what is the problem with petitioning the courts to protect their rights? Why is the *Journal* taking the side of states against hordes of disadvantaged students? What is it afraid of?

trial was that although “deplorable staffing conditions being made by some local administrators have a deleterious impact on poor and minority students,” this fact was not enough to prove that the statutes themselves were unconstitutional. One principal presented evidence that grossly ineffective teachers are “shuffled around from school to school” in a “dance of the lemons” (*Vergara v. California* Appellate Decision, 2016, p. 635), causing them to wind up in a school that serves primarily poor and minority students. Another source “corroborated this testimony, stating [...] ‘not surprisingly, the poorly performing teachers generally are removed from higher-income or higher-performing schools and placed in low-income and low-performing schools’” (pp. 635–6). This information shows how little the appeals trial helps us understand institutional racism and the causes of public dissatisfaction with schools. Why is it not surprising that poorly performing teachers are moved to low-income and low-performing schools? Are “lemons” born, or do certain educational and work experiences create them?

But, as Judge Boren incrementally shifted the blame from the statutes to their particular implementations, the ineffective teacher’s substantiality and power weakens. In the appellate ruling, the crisis is no longer that the statutes inherently funnel a pool of bad teachers to the same group of students. Instead, something in the material activity of humans operating in a structure effects how teaching talent is distributed. While the ineffective teacher does not completely disappear, the myth has lost power. Laclau theorizes what the dissolution of an imaginary horizon could look like:

... “insofar as a mythical space begins to absorb less social demands, and an increasing number of dislocations that cannot be integrated into that space of representation coexist, the space is, so to speak, re-literalized; its power of metaphorization is reduced, and its dimension of horizon is thus lost” (Laclau, 1990, p. 65).

The appellate ruling redirects the social demand, albeit slightly, onto literal issue of “deplorable staffing conditions,” where it is freed up to be rearticulated to a different network of signification. We are now free to question, by what social process does the “dance of the lemons” cause ineffective teachers end up in front of poor and minority students? Moreover, is the ineffective teacher a useful target for achieving equity?

But simply freeing ourselves from myth cannot be the ultimate goal of a movement, because “myth is constitutive of any possible society, [because] any space formed as a principle for the reordering of a dislocated structure’s elements is mythical” (Laclau, 1990, p. 67). Demythologizing deprives people of a space to enjoy, and people are going to seek alternative paths of enjoyment (McGowan, 2013). A complete de-articulation of elements back to their “objective” state would lead a society to paralysis. Myths build the meaning-making ground on which a social movement can take place. For the project of educational equity to continue, the space opened up by the dissolution of the ineffective teacher would have to be given fullness by a better myth, one that would lend materiality to new social demands. The form of this myth cannot be known in advance, as it is independent of the societal contradiction it seeks to reorganize (Laclau, 1990, p. 65). This means that the better myth requires creative vision to realize it, and agents without this vision are susceptible to reverting to old myths. For example, in a *New York Times* article about the appeals decision:

“Tom Torlakson, the state superintendent of public instruction in California, said that the appeals court decision would allow districts to recruit and train teachers at a time of shortages in the state.

“All of our students deserve great teachers,” Mr. Torlakson said in a statement. “Teachers are not the problem in our schools—they are the answer to helping students succeed on the pathway to 21st century college and careers” (Medina & Rich, 2016).

First, if teachers are not the problem, then what is? Torlakson here provides no answer, except perhaps “a time of shortages,” which is no substitute for the crisis of bad teaching and inequity. Worse, by instrumentalizing teachers toward “21st century college and careers,” he offers no new formula to reorganize the societal contradiction. Note the difference between the signifier “deplorable staffing conditions” and Torlakson’s claim. The first strategy, because of its lack of closure, provokes more questioning: what staffing conditions? Can we make sense of what’s really going on in schools like these? Perhaps it contains the seeds of myth and could be converted to a political imaginary via metaphorization with Jim Crow. Conversely, Torlakson’s boilerplate statement is a discursive dead end.

In the same article,

“Katharine Strunk, an associate professor of education at the University of Southern California, said that while the ruling may be considered a victory for teachers’ unions, the case has sparked a national conversation over teaching hiring and firing.

“‘The judges are saying things are not right in California, that there are drawbacks to the current system, but this is not something for the courts to decide,’ Ms. Strunk said. ‘I don’t think anyone believes that these laws are the best we can do’” (Medina & Rich, 2016).

As my method corroborates, the courts have indeed shown an inability to reframe the crisis of inequity, to move away from the unworkable formulation of the ineffective teacher. And, unfortunately, Medina and Rich’s article itself contributes to this deadlock—pitting “a national movement, financed by several philanthropists and businesspeople” against “entrenched protections for teachers, championed by their unions” (Medina & Rich, 2016). So, I agree with Strunk and add that I don’t believe that these sides are the best we can do. I doubt that a “national conversation” leading to structural changes could involve teacher unions *as long as* their aims are reducible to worker protections, which is a very difficult frame to break out of.

4.6 The passionate educator

Outside the coverage of the *Vergara* case, the figure of the ineffective teacher was most visible in two related discourses: what I call “passionate educator” (exemplified by Jung, 2014), and the “brilliant eccentric.” While both discourses make use of this exemplary mythic individual, they do so in opposite ways. In Jung’s *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece, titled “After the Vergara case, listen to the teachers,” Jung (2014) addresses California legislators who are tasked with changing the tenure laws: “Teachers live and breathe the opportunities and the risks identified by Vergara. They should have a voice in the development of any legislation to come out of the ruling” (Jung, 2014). She offers a list of recommendations published by her group, Teach Plus, which “suggest reforms that are smart, rational and point toward a middle ground that blends the need to weigh performance with fair practices for California’s public school teachers” (Jung, 2014). For Jung, educational policy is a matter of expertise and common ground, and *Vergara* is an opportunity to correct the problems that necessitated it.

Jung begins by taking stock of the crisis that engendered *Vergara*:

“Teachers know as well as anyone that there is room for improvement in the rules that protect their jobs. [...] One former colleague of mine, a mentor and one of the most passionate educators I know, has experienced the reality behind that finding. During the worst of the California recession, despite her abilities in the classroom, she received pink slip after pink slip simply because of her numerical place on the school’s seniority list. Even now, her more secure job is still not stable—she is being bumped from her current grade level, where she has had proven student success, into one where she has no prior experience, all because of how long she has been teaching” (Jung, 2014).

Right away we have our Barthesian French soldier: the “passionate educator,” though perhaps not as two-dimensional as Barthes’ example. Jung alludes to her former colleague’s rich history—“her abilities in the classroom” and her “proven

student success”—in order to appropriate the fullness of this image for her purposes.² Later in the article, Jung enriches this teacher further with the following:

“I know many wonderful educators in Los Angeles who go above and beyond to create the best learning environments for students: a teacher who single-handedly instills a love of gardening in her three-hour Friday after-school class; master teachers who train others in their free time; teachers who write grant proposals again and again so they can provide additional resources to their students; and teachers who make sure their schools include college nights, astronomy clubs and school beautification days, no matter what. Such teachers will always have a place in education, and they are why policymakers need to heed teachers on how to move forward from the Vergara decision” (Jung, 2014, emphasis added).

“Such teachers,” which possess an imaginary resemblance to the passionate educator, function toward a mythic referent centered around “performance.” The key to this mythic speech, the transformation of a rich sign into a label (the signifier “passionate educator”), occurs here: that “such teachers” simply “are why policymakers need to heed” them. And how should they heed teachers? By following Teach Plus’s recommendations. Jung posits a natural connection between the “passionate educator” and her recommendations: they “live and breathe the opportunities and risks identified by Vergara.” By presenting these associations as natural (biological even), Jung disavows her own subjective voice, which would be vulnerable to criticism.

At the end of Jung’s article, we get the standard talk of urgency:

“Our students can’t afford to wait for the appeals process to play out in the court system. Changes in tenure, dismissal and layoff practices should begin now. The school district and the state should work with teachers to begin reforms: Make performance a meaningful part of the process with fair and nuanced evaluations; lengthen the time it takes to get tenure; mandate feedback and development programs that help all teachers get better” (Jung, 2014).

²While I concede that Jung does articulate her “passionate educator” to that teacher’s actual lived experiences of “pink slip after pink slip,” the connection to pre-*Vergara* rules is specious.

Here we confirm Barthes' observation that the political process and mythology have an inverse relation. The school district and the state should work with teachers to do what? To enact the commonsense recommendations embodied in the naturalized "opportunity" brought on by the ruling. But politics is always a disruption of these natural associations.

4.7 The brilliant eccentric

In this section, I will show how an author mobilizes the figure of the "brilliant eccentric" by presenting a sort of anti-myth, a gap where a mythic figure would normally appear. They argue that the Standards and Accountability regime misses an unmeasurable *je ne sais quoi* in teachers that makes them "brilliant." Instead of mobilizing naturalized images to impose an external force on the profession of teaching, the "brilliant eccentric" discourse begins with a denaturalizing of teaching and ends with a kind of call to politics. I take the name "brilliant eccentric" from a *Guardian* piece (Secret Teacher, 2015) of a series authored by anonymous teachers. This piece celebrates teachers who "break the mould" but are an "endangered species" in the current "corporate" regime of accountability. Ultimately, I will argue that the brilliant eccentric is another example of McGowan's (2013) "hermeneutic ethos," and so its political potential will be limited.

"Secret Teacher" paints a fragmented but vivid picture of the brilliant eccentric:

"Everyone, surely, can look back to their school days and think of at least one teacher who would fall into this category. For me, chief among them is the maths teacher who was so detached from the world that she had never heard of Madonna, but had a passion for her subject that inspired the whole class and made double maths pass in the blink of an eye. I think also of the religious education teacher who told the girls not to shine their shoes too much lest they reflect their knickers and lead the boys into temptation, and the primary teacher who would throw

our possessions out of the window if we misbehaved” (Secret Teacher, 2015).

This passage has a parallel structure to Jung’s article, but its effect is totally different. While Jung’s article employs images toward a definite prescription, Secret Teacher’s distant memories are somehow linked to *a something* that we all know exists, or rather, existed, but we’re being robbed of it, because we all know these eccentricities would be impossible in today’s regime. This tension between a set of given qualities and a withdrawn essence is at the heart of the myths operating in “brilliant eccentric” discourses.

The rhetorical strategy of the brilliant eccentric amounts to hinting at an essence without essentializing. Contrast this with Jung, who hints at one essence (“above and beyond”) to cover up talking about another—“performance.” To essentialize means to claim to know a thing’s real qualities, and to then infer other qualities on the supposed knowledge of the real ones. Once a thing’s real qualities are totalized, it can be reduced to its utility function; it can be blackboxed. The Standards and Accountability regime is criticized on these grounds: it bases policy decisions on knowledge claims about the essence of good teaching. It disavows those claims by burying them in a cloud of mythic signifiers that talk *about* teaching, while all the while the black box of the teacher remains firmly shut.

The “brilliant eccentric” discourse sidesteps this essentializing. While positing the existence of “brilliance” and hinting provocatively toward its real qualities, it remains agnostic about these qualities. In fact, the “brilliant eccentric” effects a disruption of common sense by deliberately failing to describe the real qualities of brilliance and substituting inadequate surface qualities. In Peircean terms, these surface eccentricities are more *indices* of real qualities than representative *symbols* of them. Not only do they indicate toward some unknown real qualities, but also our very lack of knowledge of these qualities. No one would mistake an ignorance

of Madonna or a disregard for children's possessions as representative of good teaching. Instead, the eccentricities indicate towards a negative space caused by the destitution of "brilliance." This is a powerful use of language, not to attempt to represent reality, but to present it as a negative image.

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this position will be limited because it misunderstands the origin of the "brilliant eccentric." It believes that the Standards and Accountability regime fails to recognize certain teachers' gifts, and so it demands the recognition and inclusion of teachers who are currently invisible to the regime. It does not see that the regime and the "brilliant eccentric" are facets of the same cause. Secret Teacher employs the brilliant eccentric by leading us through partial manifestations of what it isn't (not knowing who Madonna is, throwing students' possessions out the window, shined shoes leading boys into temptation) in order to get us closer to what it is. In McGowan's terms, the brilliant eccentric stands for the signifier missing in the regime, and Secret Teacher is operating in the hermeneutic ethos. "While it impels us in the direction of uncovering the binary signifier, this position also recognizes that the process has an absolute limit and that, as a result, it can never succeed once and for all" (McGowan, 2013, p. 273), and so it shows us the regime's blind spot by placing nonsense where the final signifier would be.

The reason why the hermeneutic position will not change the system is that it masks the fact that the brilliant eccentric is not a byproduct of the Standards and Accountability regime, but the very thing that structures Standards and Accountability. The brilliant eccentric is not a separate species from the successful if boring teacher who meets all expectations. The failure of the brilliant eccentric shows us that the way to dismantle the ineffective teacher is by dismantling the effective teacher.

No clearer example of the ideological power of the effective teacher exists than in the *Los Angeles Times*' expansive series during the fall of 2010 titled "Grading the teachers." I decided to pursue this series while following the ineffective teacher thread in a *Salon.com* article by Simone Ryals called, "I'm one of the worst teachers in my state" (Ryals, 2014). Ryals is outraged that her name will be printed in her local paper in Florida as a low-performing teacher, despite that, by all counts, she is an excellent teacher. She has won praise from parents, her administration, and even past state tests. And, by her own professional metrics, she knows that she is doing right by her fifth graders and colleagues. However, because of a glitch in the way value-added scores are calculated, her name is being automatically printed as one of the worst. At the end of the article, Ryals says:

"A teacher in California committed suicide a few years back after his name was published in the papers for the same reasons. I don't take it nearly that seriously; still, it's an affront, and just one of many reasons so many of us throw in the towel rather than take the nonsensical abuses that come with teaching" (Ryals, 2014).

I was compelled to follow this lead. The paper in question was the *Los Angeles Times*, the teacher was Rigoberto Ruelas, and the series was "Grading the Teachers" (Lovett, 2010). The story from the series that I chose to analyze here (Felch, Song, & Smith, 2010) is one with a minimal binary opposition. Two fifth-grade teachers are examined to see how one teacher's value-added score can be so much worse than another's. The catch is that they work down the hall from one another, so they have access to the same resources and teach the same population of students. Outward appearances confirm what one would expect about their value-added scores: Mr. Miguel Aguilar, a sharp, young go-getter with a tough exterior and a heart of gold is rated "one of the most effective teachers in the district" (Felch et al., 2010), while Mr. John Smith, a mouth-breathing career changer, is wallowing

deep in the left tail of the bell curve.³ Mr. Aguilar “had brought his fifth-graders to the edge of their seats—with a math problem. Soft-spoken and often stern, he doles out praise sparingly. It only seems to make his students try harder. ‘Once in a while we joke around, but they know what my expectations are,’ he said. ‘When we open a book, we’re focused,’” (Felch et al., 2010). Meanwhile, Mr. Smith is sarcastic and routinely sends students to the principal’s office for disruptive behavior. He cannot control his class and makes excuses for it—“Sometimes there are personality conflicts.” Just as the presence of ineffective teachers “shocks the conscience” of Judge Treu, the existence of teachers like Mr. Smith is “criminal” (Felch et al., 2010) for Miko Dixon, a principal who has fired four “highly ineffective” teachers. According to Dixon, “if you get a bad teacher in second or third grade, you’re doomed” (Felch et al., 2010).

The article’s main ideological move is one of naturalization—to close the gap between the well-understood indicators of a competent teacher and the “arcane” mathematics that determine value-added scores. Mr. Aguilar’s obvious strengths—his confidence, caring, and ability to manage his own and his students’ emotions—are presented as natural indicators of his performance as confirmed by high scores. The gap between his inner vitality and his symbolic effectiveness is closed in precisely the same way as the gap between the French soldier’s inner vitality (his excessive presence) and the concept of French imperialism in Barthes’ example. This imaginary connection is compelling—I find it difficult to imagine Mr. Aguilar as anything but a caring, compassionate figure in the lives of his students—no wonder his students improve so much on their tests!

Following McGowan (2013), we must avoid seeking a missing signifier that would exonerate Mr. Smith by identifying a redeeming (if eccentric) “brilliance”

³Miguel Aguilar and John Smith are their actual names; the first mention of each name in the article links to a detailed interactive report of that teacher’s value-added score in the bell curve. Six thousand third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers’ scores can be found. As a teacher myself, I find Mr. Smith’s willingness to be interviewed by the *L.A. Times* admirable.

in him, or by showing that Dixon's second and third graders are actually not doomed, but are going to be just fine. The genuine political act would be to insist that Mr. Aguilar's students, who gained 27 percentile points in math, are nonetheless doomed—not by showing that Mr. Aguilar is a bad teacher (which would be impossible anyway), but by insisting that, because the educational system is not grounded in a concrete enough pedagogy, it cannot recognize his strengths as a teacher any better than it can recognize Mr. Smith's.

The closer we approach the effective teacher—whether through learning styles, multiple intelligences, or value-added measures—the more persistently the ineffective teacher will dog us. Instead, we can convert the bad infinite of effective teaching into the true infinite of ineffective teaching. This logic is elaborated by Pais (2012) when he suggests a way out of the endless pursuit of the achievement gap:

“... (school) inclusion and (school) exclusion are not two opposite poles, ‘struggling’ with each other, in which we take the side of inclusion. Inclusion already presupposes exclusion—it is only by means of exclusion that the notion of inclusion can be made effective. The true antagonism is not between school exclusion and school inclusion, or between equity and inequity, but between this antagonism itself and the end of school as a credit institution” (Pais, 2012, p. 81).

In this view, the pursuit of equity by ending all the particular inequities is doomed because inequity is inherent to the educational system, a client of the “capitalist state apparatus.” By the same logic, we could claim that what sustains the ineffective teacher is the “effective teacher”, an intricate complex of signifiers and images that is imbued with the capacity to create a particular range of experiences or behaviors in students. The true antagonism exists between the concept of effective teaching and the aims of education, whether they are understood as providing skilled workers for the globalized economy or transmitting cultural knowledge. Education for democratic participation is possible if society and the teaching pro-

fession can let go of the hope of fully preparing children, and forming its curriculum around the fact of this impossibility.

4.8 Myths, hegemony, and suture

Educational discourse is far from letting go. As the following editorial quotation demonstrates, the *L.A. Times* wants it all: schools taking responsibility for their educational outcomes, governments taking responsibility for students' well-being.

“The job of improving outcomes for disadvantaged students is hard, hard work. Unlike what many school reformers wanted to believe, there are no silver bullets, and progress is incremental. New ideas need to be tested before they end up being just another disappointment. Schools need helpful intervention more than punishment and disparagement. And though schools can and must do better, they can't make this happen all on their own. Students need secure housing, calm neighborhoods, access to adequate medical care and quiet spaces for doing their homework, among other things.

“But unlike what many opponents of the reform movement have advocated, schools still must be held accountable. Progress has to be measurable. Though schools need more resources, money alone is not the answer; there are plenty of low-performing schools in such high-spending states as New York as well as in low-spending states like California. And just because testing offers an admittedly limited picture of a school's overall effort, that doesn't mean it is without value or that schools shouldn't have to raise their scores as part of an overall improvement effort. Government can't beat schools into compliance, but neither can we afford to dismiss the accountability effort simply because it's hard and continues to reveal uncomfortable truths about the achievement gap” (*Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board, 2015).

This editorial came up in my main sequence of data collection. On first pass, my method of identifying a myth through its elements yields nothing: no clear crisis, villain, lost object, or hero. The editorial aims for the middle: experimentation must be tempered with patience, standards must be set and measured, and failure must be met with “helpful interventions.” By noting its attempt to find locations

for all these elements, we can observe how it implants itself deeper into the myth. According to Laclau,

“The ‘work’ of myth is to suture that dislocated space through the constitution of a new space of representation. Thus, the effectiveness of myth is essentially hegemonic: it involves forming a new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of the dislocated elements. Any objectivity, then, is merely a crystallized myth” (Laclau, 1990, p. 61).

In some other articles in my data set, the elements of the *L.A. Times* quote—all those recommendations—are articulated towards some identifiable project. The author’s position as a reformer, progressive educator, or other type of agent can be determined from their stances toward these elements. The elements themselves are articulated in ways that are typical for the type of agent. For example, a philanthropist reformer like Bruce Reed of the Eli Broad Foundation desires to “track what works and what doesn’t [because] public schools owe the public a great product” (Morrison, 2014). Test scores are the objective instrument by which the Foundation gives money. However, this *L.A. Times* editorial, by trying to say everything, says nothing. It covers the whole terrain of education, yet its prescriptions are like a Jenga tower, its elements combatting gravity without any clear organizing principle, at least at first glance.

1. “Students need secure housing,” “students need access to adequate medical care”	2. Overdetermined; holistic views of educational needs, evoking perhaps Maslow’s hierarchy, etc.	
3. Sign /		II. “WE CANNOT AFFORD TO DISMISS THE ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORT”
I. “STUDENTS NEED SECURE HOUSING,” “STUDENTS NEED ACCESS TO ADEQUATE MEDICAL CARE”, BUT...		
III. MYTHIC SIGN		

Table 4.5: Students’ needs as a mythic signifier of Accountability

These elements are used to construct a space of representation ostensibly constructed around shared responsibility, accountability, and collaboration. But, take a statement like “Students need secure housing” or “Students need [...] access to adequate medical care,” whose meanings are totally overdetermined and play across different contexts. They take on the same kitschy, sentimental aspect as the black French soldier on the cover of *Paris-Match*. The *Times* packs them in neatly at the end of the first paragraph, and begins the next paragraph: “But...” This structure is repeated in the last two sentences: “Government can’t beat schools into compliance, but neither can we afford to dismiss the accountability effort...” In Barthes’ terms, the form of those elements is appropriated toward a new concept of raising scores as part of combatting the achievement gap. The relationship between government and schools is thus reformulated in this new space: government should use tests to measure and close the achievement gap.

But myths do more than just present an alternative structure: by signaling that the dominant order lacks structure, their proposed new order “symbolizes the very principle of spatiality and structurality” (Laclau, 1990, p. 61). Governments are frustrated by attempts to “beat schools into compliance,” apply silver bullets, and so on. This deconstruction is posited with a transcendent source—our all-too-human pettiness, laziness, unwillingness to cooperate, cowardice—and the myth offers a structure to beat these weaknesses. Standards and Accountability measures are the cure for our resistance to “uncomfortable truths.” In a previous example, the superintendents who “gamed the system” to protect teachers similarly indicated a dominant order with a lacking structure (full of “whimsical results”) that is riddled with human weakness (“softness”).

4.9 Conclusion

In its final sentence, the editorial implies that our discomfort with the truth and even our laziness cause us to react against Standards and Accountability. But what if our discomfort with the truth about achievement gaps is, on the contrary, propelling us to create this bric-a-brac of recommendations? Our belief in the possibility of standards and the achievement gap are sustaining our flurry of activity to protect us from the uncomfortable truths of the inadequacy of all schooling. Pais suggests, “if our purpose is to extinguish school inequality then the whole ideological fantasy structuring schooling as a place of inclusion, freedom, and equality must go altogether” (Pais, 2012, p. 84), so we should “posit exclusion as an intrinsic quality of school” (p. 82). In the same vein, the myth of the ineffective teacher precipitates out of our belief that schools can teach effectively, to produce a very particular range of reproducible abilities or “concepts” in the mind of the learner. In education research in general over the previous two decades,

“the language of education has largely been replaced by a technical language of learning. The contradictions of the role of schooling in society and the goals of education, that fuelled part of the educational debate during the last century, have been superseded. We seem to have reached a consensus on the benefits of schooling. Therefore, the central concern now is to make it more effective” (Pais, 2012, p. 52).

Our society needs mythic figures to galvanize its diverse interests toward a goal. However, the particular myth of the ineffective teacher cannot provide this function because of its foundation on a bad infinite—a figure that recedes to infinity the closer it is approached. So, while the self and group imaginaries of reformers, journalists, philanthropists, and even parents will be strengthened, this sense of purpose and cohesiveness will come at the expense of their actual stated goal to improve education. These interests will derive satisfaction from perpetually removing ineffective teachers but no satisfaction from completing their project.

Pais wonders if our research and practical endeavors in improving education (mathematics education specifically) are unconsciously structured for failure. Pais (2012, p. 79) quotes Baldino and Cabral: “It appears the true goal [of research in mathematics education] is repetition: repetition of teaching attempts, repetition of research issues, repetition of explanations; in one word, repetition of failure” (Baldino & Cabral, 2006, p. 30). We work and work on something other than the problem in order for things to stay the same. We like things to stay the same, because we have grown used to our preferred modes of subjectivity. We derive comfort from our roles of philanthropist, parent, legislator, think tanker.⁴ All participants in the problem of the ineffective teacher benefit from the fantasy that the exclusion of groups in our society is an accident of history, and not an inherent feature of it. They create a version of the ineffective teacher by appropriating various reduced aspects (per Barthes, images) of it. The version they create allows them to reproduce themselves as caring, committed political subjects.

The problem of myth is worse than Barthes realized. For Barthes, myth stifles action because it explains the world tautologically. Myth converts the political—“the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world” (Barthes, 1991, p. 142)—into the natural and eternal. What we gain from Pais’ psychoanalytic understanding is that myths can enable political action to fold back on itself. It is not that we are simply incapacitated by myth through a feeling of inaction. Instead, we are incapacitated by a feeling of action, an ersatz politics. The “real culture shift” that Sandi Jacobs is calling for would (im)mobilize more and more subjects toward an infinitely receding target.

⁴Speaking for myself, one of my goals in writing this dissertation is ultimately to secure a comfortable subjectivity for myself within the struggle over school reform.

Chapter 5

Sugata Mitra's School in the Cloud

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze mainstream news articles to examine the discursive frames of Sugata Mitra's educational project, Self-Organized Learning Environments (Soles), which comprise the School in the Cloud, a network of low-cost internet terminals. I read mainstream discourses about the power of technology to educate, the inherent learning capacities of children, and the necessity of preparing impoverished populations for the "21st century economy." I use a method of constant comparison to note emerging themes across articles in their various dimensions. As I will argue, while Mitra and his commentators partake liberally of the prevailing mythic discourse of "digital education," Soles cannot be reduced to just another form of "digital education." The human facilitator ("granny"), although underexplored in the discourses, reveals novel possibilities and challenges for education, not only for the Third World, but universally. The chapter concludes by outlining three possible future scenarios for Sole graduates, depending on which discursive frame will dominate.

In my preliminary explorations about myths in school reform, I stumbled upon an article in *Huffington Post* by Sugata Mitra, which proclaimed: "From Plato to Aurobindo, from Vygotsky to Montessori, centuries of educational thinking have

vigorously debated a central pedagogical question: *How do we spark creativity, curiosity, and wonder in children?*” (Mitra, 2013b). However, at some more recent point in history, “the Victorians” hijacked schools to serve their purposes of creating workers for factories, and today’s schools are a holdover from this period.

“Schools today are the product of an expired age; standardized curricula, outdated pedagogy, and cookie cutter assessments are relics of an earlier time. Schools still operate as if all knowledge is contained in books, and as if the salient points in books must be stored in each human brain—to be used when needed. The political and financial powers controlling schools decide what these salient points are. Schools ensure their storage and retrieval. Students are rewarded for memorization, not imagination or resourcefulness” (Mitra, 2013b).

The mythic proportions of this proclamation struck me immediately. Mitra succinctly summed up the age we live in. The villains are political and financial powers, the lost objects are children and schools, which now ensure storage and retrieval, not imagination or resourcefulness. As we have seen in previous chapters, other authors’ discourses circulated endless signifiers of curriculum, testing, and teacher quality: the “4 C’s,” value-added scores, curricular “alignment,” state statutes that interfere with hiring and firing. Here was something new, an original *project* that did not reduce education solely to preparing students for the 21st century economy. In this dissertation, the chapters on the myths of school choice and the ineffective teacher have shown how the ways education is framed in contemporary mainstream discourses immobilizes the public and the teaching profession. The present chapter will use somewhat different methods to highlight the tension between Mitra’s activities and the talk about them. I will show how several authors talk about Mitra’s project in ways that limit it to just another form of decontextualized, deterritorialized “digital education.” However, by sifting through hegemonic ways of framing Soles, new possibilities for global education will emerge.

As I described in Chapter 2, I sought out the most mainstream discourses about Sugata Mitra's educational projects. I chose sources with the greatest total web traffic as ranked by Alexa.com, discarding sources that are not based in the Anglophone West. After searching for "Sugata Mitra," I chose the top 10 articles per source, sorted by "relevance" by that site's search function. I discarded articles that made only brief mention of Mitra and anything shorter than 100 words. After reading through a master list of articles, the next task was to follow links and perform new searches on key words or articles by the same author. The goal of reading the articles was to arrive at the *discursive frames* that Mitra and his commentators employed and how those frames evolved. Once I had collected all the articles, I ordered them chronologically and noted the emergence and disappearance of frames.

5.2 Historical background

For the past two decades, Sugata Mitra, a professor of education in Newcastle, England, has developed a "minimally invasive" curriculum in which children form collaborative teams and conduct research on the Internet. Mitra's project originated in 1999 in what he would come to call his "Hole in the Wall" experiment. At that time, he worked in a building adjacent to a city slum in Delhi. On a whim, he installed a computer terminal in an actual hole in the wall of his office building, giving passersby access to the Internet via a mouse and a screen, which he could view remotely. Soon, local children who had never seen a computer before were teaching themselves and each other how to use it. He repeated the experiment in other locations in large Indian cities with similar results. In observing the learning process, Mitra noted that students learn through a repetitive and systematic process of varying inputs and by teaching others. "They soon start to create a vocabulary to describe their experiences" (Mitra, 2012), and use the vocabulary to

make causal generalizations. They divided themselves into “knows” and “know-nots” and carried out the roles of teacher and learner around a task chosen by the group (Mitra, 2012). Over the course of learning to use the computer and Internet, some students taught themselves English (Mitra, 2013b).

Mitra’s publicized successes (Davis, 2013) with the Hole in the Wall led to his winning the 2013 TED prize for \$1 million. He pledged to use the money to set up the School in the Cloud, a network of “Self-Organized Learning Environments,” or Soles. There is no officially prescribed set of materials that constitute a Sole, and they vary throughout the world, but Mitra has put together a brief “Toolkit” (Mitra, 2015) as a startup and troubleshooting guide. They essentially consist of a small number of low-spec computer terminals connected to the Internet, with a web browser and a communication interface like Skype. The Toolkit also recommends a whiteboard and large sheets of paper for students to write questions and answers as they learn. Each Sole requires an adult for basic legal supervision; otherwise, all pedagogical guidance is provided over the Internet from a network of facilitators (“grannies”) who ask children the Big Questions, provide “encouragement,” and recognize learning as it happens. The Big Questions entirely comprise the curricular content, with students directing and organizing themselves into teams. There are no grades and no sorting of children, and the entire project is volunteer-run. In addition, Mitra has used his prize money to open seven “learning labs” in India and the U.K. and one in the United States (Newcastle University, 2015). Not much information about the labs is available in the mainstream press. The only feature of a learning lab that would differentiate it from any other Sole is that Mitra is more directly involved with studying it (Newcastle University, 2017; Scripture, 2014). Some Soles, including some learning labs, are adjoined to traditional schools, while some Soles like the learning lab in the village of Korakati in West Bengal are “constructed from the ground up” (Scripture, 2014).

The Big Question will take a central role in my analysis and speculation for the School in the Cloud. In the *SOLE Toolkit*, Mitra gives an overview of the range of possible Big Questions, and what makes a good one.

“Big questions are the ones that don’t have an easy answer. They are often open and difficult; they may even be unanswerable. The aim of them is to encourage deep and long conversations, rather than finding easy answers.

“These questions encourage children to offer theories, work collaboratively, use reason and think critically.

“A good big question will connect more than one subject area: ‘What is an insect?’ for instance, does not touch as many different subjects as ‘What would happen to the Earth if all insects disappeared?’

“Some questions are ambiguous, some precise, some light-hearted, and some poignant. They can tie in with what the children are learning at school, come from their everyday experiences, or be something completely new” (Mitra, 2015).

From this quotation, the theme of *education as self-organization* is visible. Mitra allows for more straightforward questions (“Who/what/where is the largest animal in the world?”) as a kind of warmup or route to more interesting questions, such as:

- Who made the alphabet?
- Can anything be less than zero?
- Will robots be conscious some day?
- Does a frog know it’s a frog?

These questions are strictly unanswerable, but attempting to answer one leads the student to partial mastery of the question and new avenues for research. In fact, for an answer to be meaningful, the question itself must be slightly recast as students begin to gather information. For example, the alphabet question could be interpreted a number of ways, including: because the individual inventor of

the alphabet is unknown, what cultures made the first alphabets? How did their alphabet serve as a basis for ours? Thus, students achieve mastery by necessarily making the question their own.

Mitra emphasizes that children can develop their own Big Questions depending on their interests. To facilitate this “global laboratory” (Mitra, 2015, p. 21) approach, the organization’s website contains a page of user-submitted questions. Some examples include:

- How do the flight abilities of birds and bats differ? (Japan)
- If you could live on Mars for a year, what do you think would be your biggest challenge? (India)
- Why do humans grow only two sets of teeth? (Japan)
- Why aren’t all metals magnetic? (Paradise School, Goa)
- Why do humans create music? (Amsterdam)
- Where are we going with this new method of learning? (Tijuana)

(“Big Questions”, 2018)

This small sample of questions shows a range of open-endedness, and a host of approaches could be taken in answering them. (The simple twist on why *aren’t* all metals magnetic is a nice invitation to reinterpret.) The range of acceptable answers could depend on the age of the child. This sample also shows that the questions can range in their objectivity, ranging from purely objective to the subjective/metacognitive, as in the last example from Tijuana.

In a technological system that Mitra pushes as student-driven, commentators like Selwyn (2013) overlook the importance as the Sole student’s adult interlocutor: the “granny.” Mitra’s early work in the Hole in the Wall involved students self-organizing and deciding on their own tasks. By 2009, he was setting up Skype

calls between Indian children and British storytellers, observing the improvement in children's self-confidence and English skills. He developed the granny concept to leverage the self-organization, self-direction, and creativity of groups of children. Mitra consistently defines "her" role—their actual gender is not important (Wakefield, 2012)—as providing "encouragement" and asking the Big Questions. Ideally retired education professionals, grannies can work from anywhere in the world.

As I will discuss, the many facets of the granny relation are barely discussed currently, despite their central importance to Mitra's project. More often than not, the relation is decontextualized and presented in terms of mutual benefit: children get someone who cares about them, gently guides their inquiry, and helps them cultivate a more prestige dialect of English, while the granny gains a quasi-familial friendship (see Gee, 2014). However, in another article, a granny tries to mitigate the colonial overtones by "trying to make sure [their chats are] relevant to [the children's] lives. I don't like the idea of us zooming in from the west and trying to wave some wand over Indian children" (Cadwalladr, 2015). In any event, the question of whether this relationship will reproduce or transform colonial and other relations is far from settled.

5.3 Trajectory of discursive frames

Here, I will outline the trajectory of Mitra's discourse about his work, starting with the observation that kids can teach themselves, to the idea that they can learn and self-organize without a teacher. As I will show, in the beginning, Mitra frames the Hole in the Wall in terms of the present mastery and experiences of Indian children. At the time of his 2013 TED Talk, he situates knowledge in the Cloud and reduces its value to zero. After this point, he increasingly discusses his project in

terms of the 21st century worker in a globalized economy, while his commentators pay increasing attention to the role of grannies.

Phase 1: Pre-TED

“Kids can teach themselves”

The earliest article in this study, published in *The Guardian* on October 17, 2000, a year after the first Hole in the Wall experiments, focus on Mitra and his colleagues’ surprising finding that children can figure out how to use a computer without any adult guidance.

“‘Straightaway children approached and began learning how to operate the computer,’ says Sugata Mitra, director of research and development at NIIT. ‘No one showed them how to use it. They came on their own, because they were curious, and learnt by a process of trial and error’” (Cohen, 2000).

At this stage, Mitra is concerned with the children’s concrete accomplishments on their own terms.

Years before the School in the Cloud concept, Mitra is already speculating about the low cost of installing 100,000 kiosks around India and running them for five years. At the end of this interval, “The 13 year-olds of today would be 18. They would vote. I think we would have irreversible social change in India” (Cohen, 2000). Thus, the earliest published frame for Mitra’s project is the inherent power of Internet connectivity to bring about social change.

Learning without a teacher

By 2009, children had progressed beyond the mere operation of the computer, and so Mitra was planning “to set up educational facilities in remote areas of India so that groups of children can organise their own learning to pass the government high school examinations without a teacher” (Tobin, 2009). Journalists were

inquiring about the Hole in the Wall's application to schooling worldwide: if children can accomplish so much without a teacher, what does that say about the necessity of traditional schooling? Mitra insisted that nothing beats a committed and competent teacher, but the fact is that many places in the world will never attract good teachers. Those are the places where a Hole in the Wall can make a difference. This frame builds on the earlier frame by adding the lack of teacher to the list of problems that can be partially remedied by Hole in the Wall stations. Although at this stage Mitra accepts the inequities of the system and tries to work within it, he has "recruited a British woman to spend a few hours a week reading to the children" (Tobin, 2009), suggesting that his stations can provide them something unique through long-distance human interaction.

Education as self-organization

Mitra's discourse then takes an epistemological turn. In a *Guardian* article from 2010, Mitra pronounces his oft-quoted definition: "Education is a process of self-organisation and learning is its emergent property" (Mitra, 2010). Through this definition of education in universal terms, we see some of the earliest talk of what the Hole in the Wall experiment can teach the Western educational tradition. Because self-organization, not learning, is the central activity of education, Mitra urges teachers everywhere to "let go" of their students' activity.

He demonstrates an example of the emerging Sole concept in Britain, where 9-year-old students pursue a question by organizing themselves and even maintaining order. The "friendly but not knowledgeable" (Mitra, 2010) mediator's role is here defined: to provide a "safe and friendly environment" and maintain the computers. Mitra has begun by 2010 to think the global implications of his project. In the same *Guardian* article, he states,

“In another school, with the help of a young teacher, Emma Crawley, we are evolving a model that could have far-reaching implications. The children work in groups of four, each group with a computer connected to the internet. They are given selected GCSE questions to work on. They usually get the answers right. Two months later, they are tested again, this time, without a computer, and each student by themselves – as in a normal exam. The children show near perfect recall of the answers. Is this learning? I think it is” (Mitra, 2010).

The question “Is this learning?” underscores the “far-reaching,” i.e. universalist aims of his research. Education as a process of self-organization is self-evident. However, in order to recognize learning, Mitra resorts to the traditional method: exams that measure knowledge stored and recalled. It is interesting that he relies on an “emergent property” of education in order to justify it, rather than the evident fact of the children’s self-organizing.

In another article, Lucy Tobin interviews Crawley, who has received Mitra’s universalist message and applied it to her own practice:

“‘I’d seen footage of children using the computers in India,’ she says. ‘The children were learning things far beyond their years in a short time, without a teacher. It made me think we should give it a go here’” (Tobin, 2010).

Here, Crawley has internalized the advice to “let go,” but she tests the children anyway:

“Perhaps because it seems like fun, the knowledge seems to stick. Three months after one session, Crawley gave the children a surprise test. ‘I was shocked when I marked the papers: they had all remembered everything, even though the test was a surprise’” (Tobin, 2010).

Like Mitra, Tobin finds the test results noteworthy and gives voice to the idea that tests authorize learning, which in turn authorizes education.

“Knowing is obsolete?”

If learning is a byproduct of self-organization, then what role does knowledge play? In his 2013 TED Talk, Mitra ponders, “Could it be—a devastating question, a question that was framed for me by Nicholas Negroponte—could it be that we are heading towards or maybe in a future where knowing is obsolete?” (Mitra, 2013b). The world is saturated with universally available knowledge, an inert substance with a value approaching zero. Therefore, any worker who can be measured by their possession of knowledge is worthless and infinitely replaceable. This conception of knowledge represents a dramatic shift in framing: education itself is now the problem, and Soles are the solution.

With this change in perspective alone, we can see an essential difference between Mitra’s project and the curricular conceptions inherent in Standards and Accountability, which infinitely seeks to measure a student’s acquisition of content. Perhaps not as obviously, the frame “knowledge is obsolete” is also opposed to school choice. As we saw, in one form, school choice respects a universal set of standards, but seeks to optimally match a student and their “learning style” with the corresponding educational setting.

With this new problem and solution established, Mitra’s frames get increasingly mythic, gaining a narrative account of *where things went wrong* (Kuypers, 2009). The problem for Mitra is that schools are still geared toward filling students with either knowledge or signifiers of acquired knowledge (like GCSE credits). This valueless knowledge includes not only grammar and mental arithmetic, but all forms of know-how formerly attributed to professions. Mitra consistently frames schools’ obsession with doling out knowledge as a relic of the Victorian economic apparatus. “The Victorians” dominated because they were able to mass-produce goods, and their educational system reflected this logic by mass-producing knowledgeable workers. But now, the needs of employers have changed. Because

the economic powers no longer benefit from mass production, they no longer need knowledgeable workers, or even workers who conform to professional standards. They need workers that can retrieve and manage the vast quantities of available information with flexibility.

A parallel development in Mitra's discourse situates his project and his critique of Victorian education in a more universalist frame. Mitra begins his article for *Huffington Post*, written on the heels of his TED Prize, at the beginning: "From Plato to Aurobindo, from Vygotsky to Montessori, centuries of educational thinking have vigorously debated a central pedagogical question: How do we spark creativity, curiosity, and wonder in children?" (Mitra, 2013b). He invokes these educational "saints" to prop up his project without considering what they actually debated. His project relies on "creativity, curiosity, and wonder in children" as its organizing principle. By claiming that the central question of education has always been the same as his own organizing principle, he eternalizes and mythologizes his project. In this eternalized frame, the Victorians committed a villainy by appropriating education for their economic gain. But now, he says, the changing historical circumstances (the Era of Google) have provided us with the *opportunity* and the *necessity* ("can and must") to restore the original organizing principle of education. Mitra not only eternalizes the aims of education, he naturalizes them: "My wish is to help design the future of learning by supporting children all over the world to tap into their innate sense of wonder" (Mitra, 2013b). So the project of education is and always was subordinate to children's nature. It is possible to argue here that Mitra here shows the same confusion as Julia Fisher. When he argues that the Victorians' system is simultaneously obsolete (incompatible with the needs of today's employers) and antithetical to children's nature, he brings these two needs into a mythical symbiosis.

Phase 2: Post-TED

Mitra vs. his commentators

Since his TED Talk, Mitra has expanded his palette of frames. In a *BBC* report by Wakefield, Mitra uses the familiar frame of “leveling the educational playing field” for the 21st century workplace:

“In an ideal world, we would have great schools with great teachers absolutely everywhere. Yet the reality is that there will always be places where good teachers cannot or will not go. If we are going to level the education playing field around the world, we need an alternative system that also prepares children to enter a technology driven workplace” (Wakefield, 2013).

Here, Mitra implies that Soles have less to offer “great schools with great teachers,” but can provide a kind of entry into the workplace for populations where “good teachers cannot or will not go.” The concept of “the workplace” is not explicated or differentiated anywhere, so, in the ever-present context of globalism, it is reasonable to read the Sole’s value in that it will make its students globally competitive. Conversely, the loftier TED Talk is more about the incomparable, concrete accomplishments that Sole children show *in the present moment*.

For Mitra, education in the First World has little to do with expanding a worker’s abilities and more to do with *signifying* their ability to “fit the mold.” The problem is that the IT industry, where all the good jobs will be, does not want workers with these markers. In one article, he describes a typical “boy” from a “poorer area” applying for jobs. That graduate’s skills, developed through hard work and perseverance, are useless in today’s world:

“the employer says, ‘What can you do well?’ And he’ll say, ‘I have good handwriting, my grammar’s excellent, I can spell properly and I can do arithmetic in my mind.’ Well, if I was the boss I would think: I don’t care about your handwriting, everything’s done on computers. Grammar is not particularly important, we deal with the Chinese and the Americans who don’t bother about grammar at all, as long as it

makes sense. Spelling is corrected by the computer and you don't need to know anything about arithmetic. In fact the less arithmetic you do in your head the better. [...]

“What you want are people who don't care about how they dress, don't care about how they talk, would like to think of things from different angles. These are the guys who do well. So, you're producing the wrong product. It's a factory left over from an era that has gone away” (Cadwalladr, 2015).

Remarkably, knowledge is not only useless to the worker (“obsolete”), it is a liability. By talking about the graduate as the “wrong product,” positioning himself as “the boss,” Mitra frames the problem of education through the values of the generic employer. The “right product,” then, would graduate from a school that provided them not with skills but with what I call meta-skills, which resemble the 21st century skills from Chapter 3: “how to research information, evaluate sources, work in teams” (Cadwalladr, 2015). In these two post-TED articles, Mitra has “regressed” to talking about graduates satisfying employers. He does not radicalize his position and “negate the negation”—meta-skills are a negation of obsolete skills, but the goal of satisfying employers remains. As I will elaborate later, the radical position would be that meta-skills can negate the very concept of the “boss” and help graduates individually and collectively become their own boss.

In the mainstream sources of my data set, Mitra's commentators, who are overall cautiously supportive of his project, never venture outside the range of Mitra's discursive palette. Different commentaries touch on different aspects of the project. Joel Shatzky has connected Mitra's critique of the “industrial model” to the well-known “banking method” of education and framed it as unnatural and antithetical to children's normal development, akin to “cutting their feet to fit your shoes” (Shatzky, 2015). While Shatzky does not explicitly support Mitra's project, he uses the same appeal to children's supposed natural inclinations. Shatzky also writes

about the democratic potential of a personalized education, a frame that Mitra has used since 2000.

Few articles in the data interview Sole students or graduates on their experiences. In the same article as above, Cadwalladr shows us an aspirational frame in her interview with Arun Chavan, who started life as a “slum child” in a coastal town in India with access to a Hole in the Wall kiosk, and is now a Ph.D. student in evolutionary biology at Yale. Can Chavan put his finger on that special magic that so profoundly influenced his life? In Chavan’s words:

“I’ve been asked this before and I’m always really uncomfortable with the idea of this as a hole-in-the-wall to Yale kind of story... I feel like some of the most important influences I had were the people I had the opportunity to meet. It opened up my mind to a lot of things” (Cadwalladr, 2015).

In an interview on the TED site (called “From the Hole in the Wall to Yale”), Chavan states,

“Along with the ‘Hole in the Wall,’ many other things—interactions with certain people, books, and parents—have impacted my way of thinking. It’s really hard to tease apart what I have learned from the ‘Hole in the Wall.’ I think that you can learn anything if you really want to—this could possibly be a ‘Hole in the Wall’ effect. [...]

“My father writes and directs plays. As a kid, I acted in many of them. These plays have significantly influenced my thinking and have greatly contributed to who I am. If I had to give a TED talk, it would probably be about that experience” (Wilson, 2013).

Chavan is uncomfortable being identified with the narrative that his experiences at the Hole in the Wall determined the course of his life. Yet this is precisely the narrative that Wilson promotes! And Mitra would not oppose this narrative, as he himself has described his dream of the “Slumdog Nobel Laureate.” Chavan, however, is more keen to identify the various sources of social and cultural capital—“the people I had the opportunity to meet” and his father’s plays he acted in. The only idea that Chavan is comfortable ascribing to the Hole in the Wall is the idea

“that you can learn anything if you really want to.” Neither article cited above discusses any concrete knowledge about biology or any other subject that Chavan may have picked up in a Hole in the Wall. Nor do they describe an instance of an adult inspiring Chavan to move to the United States, to pursue a career as a biologist, or any other concrete advice. If the Hole in the Wall provided Chavan with anything it was an aspirational frame.

5.4 Discussion

Phase 1: Pre-TED. The role of the “granny.”

Now that I have enumerated a range of discursive frames, I will elaborate on the possibilities inherent in them.

Mitra’s early talks and interviews discuss the question of knowledge and the empowerment of learners. For Mitra, in a world of full access to information, the value of knowledge approaches zero. Traditional workers are as replaceable as the knowledge they possess. To restore the worker’s value, Soles replace the task of accumulating knowledge with the task of commanding knowledge. “The ability to discriminate between alternatives, then put facts together to solve problems would be critical. That’s a skill that future employers would admire immensely” (Mitra, 2013a). Graduates of this system will be armed with what I call meta-skills to satisfy employers. Mitra names them: “flexibility, [...] resourcefulness, [...] and] the ability to find things out quickly” (Mitra, 2013a).

These flexible Sole graduates will be prevented from appropriating their own knowledge toward what might be called a profession. They will never achieve professional mastery, the power to define their own ends, even in the most prestigious and high-tech fields. They will remain at the mercy of the job market, always wondering if they are flexible, resourceful, and quick enough. Where the worker

finds great insecurity, the employer will find security. This situation, in which the worker's professional knowledge is alienated from the employer's demands, approaches the ideal of G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic of Lordship and Bondage. In this idealized narrative, the worker's (bondman's) consciousness is framed entirely by the employer's (lord's) needs, while the employer's privilege is to remain blissfully ignorant of the worker's knowledge (Hegel, 2004, § 191). Mitra's touted 21st century meta-skills will benefit a new class of workers, but it will deepen class divisions. The meta-workers trained in Soles will be no better off than the traditional knowledge-bearing worker's—both workers' value approaches zero. The difference is that the more flexible worker will be all the more exploitable.

Returning to this study's findings, it is possible to read the talk about Emma Crawley in Mitra (2010) and Tobin (2010) in these terms. Crawley, a British teacher of fourth graders, decided to adopt some Sole practices in her classroom. She was amazed at how students retained knowledge months after learning it, as measured on a pretest and surprise posttest. While Mitra is redefining education as self-organization, by focusing on tests, he and Tobin resort to the traditional definition of learning as retained knowledge measured in a performance structure. That performance is repeated, indicating that something is retained (in the children's heads) even though they have not accomplished anything concretely new with the knowledge. Because Mitra, Tobin, and Crawley are making a *comparison* between performances, they must *abstract* something to compare between pre- and posttest. If Mitra had recognized the basis of this abstraction (as captured on a GCSE test) in the very British Victorian system he wishes to overthrow, he might have resisted the attraction of the test in recognizing the students' accomplishments.

The precariousness of specialized workers is not new; in his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci wrote,

“The tendency today is to abolish every type of schooling that is ‘disinterested’ (not serving immediate interests) or ‘formative’—keeping at most only a small-scale version to serve a tiny elite of ladies and gentlemen who do not have to worry about assuring themselves of a future career. Instead there is a steady growth of specialized vocational schools, in which the pupil’s destiny and future activity are determined in advance” (Aronowitz, 2008, p. 154).

Gramsci conceded that formal schooling should involve some manual and technical skills, but the heart of a “disinterested” or “formative” curriculum, which enables students to assume their own destinies through the greatest variety of future activities, is the very curriculum reserved for the elite class—the “old school of the grammatical study of Latin and Greek together with the study of their respective literatures and political histories” (Aronowitz, 2008, p. 156). Gramsci’s “formative” school would be aimed at the production of moral public intellectuals who would reform society’s institutions under popular control. Clearly, this prescription is at odds with the Sole, for which there is no society, only nomadic, self-directed knowledge-bearers armed with meta-skills. At this point in the discussion, Soles have no answer to the question of societal reform.

Is there an organizing principle competing with that of “skills”? After all, in a Sole, there are no exams or pre-established curriculum. Is it possible that students are being trained, not toward certain skills that might satisfy future masters, but *to be the masters of the future*? In that case, the child would be an employer of knowledge, knowledge being desubjectivized, simply existing “in the Cloud.” By keeping knowledge external to the child, that child’s curriculum would consist of one Big Question after another, the child racking up a string of concrete accomplishments, without measuring or comparing “progress.” Such a child would not be training to someday possess skills an employer might find useful—they would be training for mastery of their present condition. Unlike the abstract, “testable” conception of knowledge discussed in the Crawley example, concept mastery is al-

ways concrete, in that concepts are produced in the collaborative moment and are thus incomparable (see Blunden, 2010). In psychoanalytic terms, the child's mastery would be evident in how they limit their enjoyment by commanding knowledge toward the reproduction of their own desire. The child's enjoyment would not get caught up in the bad infinity of trying to attain enough knowledge. Rather, they would find a true infinite in the limitations of their project, collaboratively set with the granny. It is not that Crawley's students did not produce concrete knowledge, it is that the educators could understand their accomplishment only in abstract terms; they could recognize the students only as possessors of knowledge and not as masters of their conditions.

We can observe (and speculate on) the organizing principle of mastery by examining the granny's unique capacities. In traditional digital education, which basically involves a student, a laptop, and online courses, the student does not accomplish anything other than receive a certificate of retained or applied abstract knowledge. By contrast, the Sole student accomplishes something concrete in pursuing a granny's quest. The granny crafts a Big Question based on what will "provoke curiosity" (thegrannycloud.org). Importantly, Mitra has specified in the Sole Toolkit that an ideal Big Question is difficult, even unanswerable, but is designed to generate research and discussion: "The aim of them is to encourage deep and long conversations, rather than finding easy answers" (Mitra, 2015). The child can never satisfy the granny's question with certainty. She remains an inscrutable presence in the child's life, someone who lives in another world and who formally does not possess the knowledge the student is employing toward an answer. The only hope for the child is that the figure who sent him on this impossible quest will return some glimmer of recognition and love. This is the role that "friendly encouragement" plays: it focuses the child's wandering and converts it into learning. The child's imperfect result at answering the question is the accomplished

concrete object. The child will adjust course with a related Big Question, and the cycle will repeat. While Mitra sets up the granny as the mediator between child and Internet, it is rather the case that the Internet mediates between child and granny. The granny is not a “role model”—the student should have no hope of ever identifying with her, and it helps that in many cases she hails from a country that is foreign to the student. The granny is certainly not “on the side of” the student, but her desire becomes the Pole Star for the student’s journey.

That is why it is so crucial for Sole proponents to disengage their talk from discourses of “digital education.” Although the child will never master the Internet—which Mitra equates with “some sort of collective global consciousness out there” (Cadwalladr, 2015)—by progressively mastering the granny’s questions, the child may eventually take on the role of question asker, a possibility that Mitra also raises in the Sole Toolkit. By the time the child reaches “graduation,” the granny’s recognition will have been replaced by some other Cause in the child’s life.

At this point in the discussion, the Sole is better equipped to engage with Gramsci’s “formative” curriculum, to show its potential to bring about a societal transformation. Both are subject to the same critique: while they are outwardly “disinterested,” serving no overt agenda, without special care they are vulnerable to appropriation by systems of power. A classics curriculum, based on strict intellectual and bodily discipline, can exclude whoever refuses to conform to it, and a self-directed curriculum can subject students to the allure of capital, so they confuse their needs with capital’s. To prevent this appropriation, both systems rely on a committed force of moral workers to facilitate learning. While Gramsci’s teacher force consists of specially trained scholars, the Sole’s granny force needs only the pretense of knowledge in order to function effectively. But it is the Sole’s anarchic structure that presents the greatest advantage over Gramsci’s model. Gramsci relies on the old Master Signifier of Renaissance humanism, along with its com-

manded signifiers of discipline, precision, and method, in order to direct students' desire. While Renaissance humanism arguably provided a viable Master Signifier in the days of Italian Fascism, the Sole insists that, in the fragmented world of today, no such Master Signifier is capable of organizing students' desire. Through the principle of "education as self-organization," the Sole contains the possibility for a new Master Signifier to arise organically, depending on students' answer to the Big Question.

In the process of "education as self-organization," the child-Internet-granny triad is expanded to a team of students. The symbolic resources of the Internet are likewise expanded to the exchange of language (linguistic signs) among students. Their exchange of language serves to strengthen their individual relationships to the granny's inscrutable desire (expressed through a Big Question), and they form a bond around this shared task. In the beginning of Mitra's experiment, the computer terminal itself provided enough mystery to compel children to self-organize around it (as "knows" and "know-nots") and master it. Computers presented a kind of playground, a finite set of constraints to work through. Progressing through learning to use the mouse pointer, Microsoft Paint, games, chat, and how to google, children eventually exhausted what they could get out of the machine. While a computer is masterable in theory, the granny's question is formally unmasterable. The granny supports "education as self-organization" by heightening the mystery of the object-at-hand, turning the vast and chaotic Internet into an ever-shifting playground, finitely constrained by a Big Question. (In this way, Mitra is justified in claiming Vygotsky as a predecessor.)

Phase 2: Post-TED. Soles as "digital education"?

Since 2013, Mitra has pushed his discourse on Soles deeper into the consensual frame of *21st century digital education* outlined by Selwyn (2013). By examining

how Mitra and his commentators uphold or diverge from these points of consensus, we will see how his project can distinguish itself in other respects.

Perhaps the most apparent value sees “education as an area of increased informalisation and risk” (Selwyn, 2013, p. 13). Mitra fully participates in the “re-schooling” aspect of narrative (typified by Sir Ken Robinson) in which formal schooling is an obsolete relic of the Victorian Age. In this discourse,

“informality is usually assumed to work in favour of the individual and at the expense of self-interested formal institutions. Thus unwittingly or not, digital education provides a ready means through which informalised and dis-organised sensibilities are internalized as norms and values by individuals, groups and institutions” (Selwyn, 2013, p. 13).

If the “winners” of the formal public educational system have been Western countries, then naturally the Third World underdog that will level the playing field will make use of informalized and perhaps privatized learning. Because the formal system is interested in keeping certain populations down, any alternative system that can show gains, however minimal, will gain traction. Mitra and his commentators can make so much use of anecdotal success stories like Arun Chavan because they disrupt the determinism of Victorian education for the Third World by offering existence proofs.

The next point of similarity pertains to the “reconfiguration of education into a commodity state—i.e. framing education processes and practices into the ‘market form’ of something that has calculable and quantifiable value, and that is therefore exchangeable” (Selwyn, 2013). The status of a Sole education as commodity precariously depends on its quantitative or qualitative evaluation. On the one hand, if Sole proponents continue pushing the narrative of “leveling the global playing field,” they will continue to instill a Sole education with quantifiable exchange value. On the other hand, if they insist on the incomparable qualitative value of the Sole and resist converting their education into a commodity (or “social capi-

tal”), they stand a chance to educate their students toward some other purpose, such as mastery over their conditions. This second option would require Mitra and his commentators to break from digital education community channels and stake some new ideological ground. Remarkably, the materials about Mitra on the TED website, including his 2013 talk, make little or no mention of the quantitative value of a Sole education, preferring to focus on the accomplishments and experiences of students.

In other respects, Sole discourses diverge even more from the consensus. Selwyn (2013) describes the “orthodox” position that “digital realignment and reconfiguration of education is inevitable” (p. 8) and the ideological “belief” in the inherent democratic and antiauthoritarian power of inexpensive personal technology. Mitra (2013b) has certainly shared in this talk, stating that we “can and must” wonder “just how the Internet might influence the contemporary answer” to the question of education. However, his work in adapting technology to his pedagogical aims represents a much more dialectical process than dogmatically introducing technology to educational settings. One commentator lauds Mitra for dedicating “over 20 years of his research career to improving the lives and opportunities of some of the world’s poorest people through his innovations in computing” (Wakefield, 2013). It is notable and quite correct that Mitra’s accomplishments are recognized as “innovations in computing”: he has expanded what people can do with computers by adapting inexpensive and often old hardware and software to his participants’ realities. Instead of taking a “fundamentalist” view of digital education, Mitra has done this work to fulfill the prophecy of educational technology—and given credit to the technology! The lessons of Mitra’s concrete responses to the realities of his participants cannot easily be universalized (“scaled” and sold) through the abstractions of capitalism, unlike the “iPad for every child” slogan that Selwyn (2013, p. 3) berates. What can be repeated is the hard dialectical work done by

people committed to the education of a population, which may or may not involve innovations in computing.

Continuing on to other points, digital education typically values “individualization of practice and action” (Selwyn, 2013, p. 13), meaning that, because the tools are equally available to all, the responsibility for using them effectively falls on the student. Since his early experiments with Hole in the Wall, Mitra has made self-direction a core organizing principle, even as children work collaboratively in a local team. However, the key difference between self-direction in a Sole and in other digital education models is the role of student accountability, or the “consequences of choice.” In Cadwalladr’s article, Mitra challenged students to tell him about Cézanne, who he had heard painted still lifes. At the end of the session, some groups of children impressed Mitra and Cadwalladr by what they could say about Cézanne’s painting techniques. Unfortunately, one group reached a dead end searching for “Suzanne,” and Cadwalladr expresses her disappointment at yet another group:

“I couldn’t help finding it a bit depressing that the group of girls had written an elaborate ‘Cézanne’ at the top of the sheet of paper that was supposed to display their results and three of them were colouring it in, while just one of them attempted to find out some information at the computer.

“‘It’s conditioning,’ Mitra said later when I asked him about it and he pointed out one of the flaws of his own system. ‘It’s worse in places where girls have been told to be quiet, so they don’t talk. That obviously pulls their results down’” (Cadwalladr, 2015).

Both Mitra and Cadwalladr could perceive a difference in the quality of output among groups. A careful facilitator might use her knowledge of the girls’ cultural “conditioning,” notice their lack of engagement, and intervene. So it is notable that no interventions were made to “unstick” this group or the one on a fool’s errand for Suzanne. While perhaps extreme, this example shows that Sole students can be given wide latitude (typical of digital learning) in dealing with the conse-

quences of their choices. Crucially, however, the groups' lackluster performances cannot "count against them," but could only be used as evidence of their unwillingness to study a particular topic or method, thus putting the responsibility back on the facilitator to engage them differently. As Mitra has stated, opting out of a particular activity is permissible in a Sole.

Selwyn's "educational concerns against less collective lines" are not so applicable in a Sole, because students are not "unencumbered by the need to learn with those in one's immediate context or locality" (Selwyn, 2013, p. 13). Competitiveness, a related value typical of digital education, is formally unenforceable by the Sole because students are prevented from being ranked. Each student group's progress is incomparable to what others are doing, because there are no criteria for measuring and thus comparing progress. All this hinges on whether knowledge is an accumulable substance, which Mitra has stated it is not.

The findings of my study somewhat instantiate Selwyn's generalization of "the increased expansion of education into unfamiliar areas of family and social life" (Selwyn, 2013, p. 13). The degree to which Soles will contribute to the "pedagogization" of society is debatable. It is clear that, unlike more portable forms of digital education, the Sole is contained within definite borders that rely on students' physical presence. No articles in the data set discuss whether Soles interact with their communities; in fact, they tend not to discuss the communities at all, beyond descriptors such as "village" or "slum." The School in the Cloud website does provide information about why certain individuals and groups were motivated to open a Sole, and how they have designed it to serve the community. Mitra never expresses any intention to "pedagogize" communities outside the Sole, so it is unclear how its essential function—Big Questions that drive Internet research—could affect other spheres of children's lives. Soles, which use no extrinsic mo-

tivators, could have a much different pedagogizing effect on society than digital education that “gamifies” life with rewards and punishments.

Selwyn’s last point about digital education, the “altered emotional aspects of educational engagement,” amount to a “spiritual alienation” in which the “conditions of good work become detached from the conditions of good character” (Selwyn, 2013, p. 14) due to “education being experienced on less immediate, less intimate, and perhaps more instrumental grounds” (p. 14). Here, Selwyn echoes Coffield and his colleagues’ observations on how the DfES Standards Unit “interpret pedagogy as the unproblematical application of apparently neutral, value-free techniques, which they have accorded the status of ‘best practice’” (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 128). The Sole’s answer to this charge would be the granny’s central role in converting the child’s immediate encounter with information into a *purposeful* endeavor through the pedagogical tool of the Big Question. In fact, the task of overcoming Selwyn’s description of “spiritual alienation”—“partial, segmented, task-orientated, fragmented and discontinuous nature of digital education” (Selwyn, 2013, p. 13)—could provide a guiding principle for designing Big Questions. A granny professionalized in this principle would work toward incorporating Big Questions into the greater arc of a child’s interests and aspirations, inculcating the child into a world, and thus aligning the “conditions of good work” with those of “good character.” Few other forms of re-schooling or de-schooling formally contain this possibility.

The fact that Soles cannot take for granted that all students are immersed in the same world is instructive for traditional Western schools. In the post-*Brown* era, schools have encountered the fact that they prepare different groups of students for different destinies, yet as Pais (2012) has argued they have not seen their failure to do so as an inherent feature. Racial integration and the Least Restrictive Environment have brought groups into spatial proximity, organizing their activity

around the same set of objects, but particular types of interactions with those objects are still reserved for privileged groups. As the space of possible interactions (affordances) is part of what defines a world, I conclude that American schools prepare students for different worlds and moreover are a microcosm of these proximal yet different worlds.

In this spatial sense, the Sole is more emancipated than the Western school because it is not burdened with the pretense of its students belonging to the same world. Mitra is well aware of this fact, which is why he wants to prepare his students for all possible worlds—or the absence of a world—by developing their meta-skills. Similarly, in earlier chapters, we saw that Charles Fadel’s kitchen sink curriculum, Gardner’s theory of six (or seven? ten?) Multiple Intelligences, and the specialized schools afforded by greater school choice are doing their best to cope with the absence of a world that students will face. But Soles have an advantage over all these models, which even Mitra himself ignores when he talks about meta-skills: Soles have the capacity to generate worlds and myths with their students.

Now we can return to Laclau’s Kantian notion that a mythic space generates the conditions for objectivity. Through her gentle encouragement and psychic distance, the granny offers students the Freirean power (if not yet the responsibility) to name their world, to engender the objects in that world with the consistency of a myth, and the ethical imperative to live that myth. This claim may seem highly speculative—as long as we are speculating, why not claim that traditional Western schools can offer students the same power, at least in principle? My response would be that Soles simply have far less curricular and administrative baggage. The granny is the *sine qua non* of the Sole; get the granny’s role right and the whole system is on a stable ground for emancipating students.

5.5 The futures of Sole graduates

Through his evolving discourse about his Hole in the Wall and School in the Cloud projects, Mitra has connected children, knowledge, and their economic futures along varied lines. I will now present three possibilities for how epistemologies of Soles, as expressed in discourse, might influence these realities. Any combination of these idealized scenarios could occur in varying degrees.

In the first scenario, Soles will produce a new type of super-exploitable worker by providing access to the global job market to formerly excluded populations. Mitra's globally generic 'boss' figure would benefit greatly from the influx of new, super-flexible meta-workers who will outcompete and displace their Western counterparts. This boss is a member of what Robinson and Santos (2014) call the "transnational capitalist class (TCC), [...] a new class group grounded in global over local or national circuits of accumulation and which, together with transnationally-oriented state bureaucrats and politicians, is the manifest agent of capitalist globalization" (p. 5). The TCC has benefitted from the creation of a new type of "flexibilized" or "Walmartized" worker, who is not provided any state protection (unlike capital, which receives state subsidies). This worker is motivated to avoid joining, at any cost, those "supernumeraries... that portion marginalized and locked out of productive participation in the capitalist economy and constituting some one-third of humanity" (p. 6). Not surprisingly, Soles tend to spring up in "places where good teachers cannot or will not go" (Wakefield, 2013), i.e. among populations on the brink of exclusion. While Robinson and Santos describe the ways in which the TCC creates the conditions for super-exploitable immigrant workers, it is possible to extend the concept to the Sole graduate: such a worker, flexibly working over the Internet, will be exploitable without having to immigrate to the nation that is exploiting them! The responsibility for providing basic services to that worker would fall on their home nation, not on the corpo-

rate/national partnership benefiting from their labor. The more we talk about enabling access to 21st century jobs for impoverished populations by teaching them meta-skills, the more we push students into this future.

A second possibility is that Sole graduates will join the TCC or other entrepreneur class by recognizing and leveraging their meta-skills. As I have suggested, many Sole graduates will be citizens of large countries with rapidly growing economies (the so-called BRICS countries, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, representing half the global population). The fate of these entrepreneurs would depend on the success of BRICS states to “take on the international economic order” (Rangarajan, 2014) of U.S. hegemony, which would affect their ability to mobilize capital toward infrastructure projects and other public-private development initiatives of BRICS. Such a future would be supported by the current discursive threads that evaluate Soles based on their capacity to promote creative problem-solving, i.e. technocratic solutions to problems posed in abstract terms by capital interests.

In a third scenario, Sole graduates have fully and concretely realized their material conditions and located themselves in the cause of creating a new economic order, one not based on exploitation. Soles already contain all the materials necessary for a transformative pedagogy: the basic triad of student-granny-Internet (world). It is also conceivable for a granny’s question to compel students to venture outside the walls of their Sole and seek to understand their local conditions in global (universal) terms. In order to realize a Freirean possibility, the School in the Cloud would have to undergo a formal transformation. In its current form, it contains a repository of Big Questions that serve as examples for new grannies or Sole operators. However, for students to transcend their conditions, the ultimate horizon of a granny’s knowledge cannot remain at the level of content. (It remains to be seen whether professionalizing grannies is in the spirit of Soles or antithet-

ical to it. My wager is on the former option.) As Paulo Freire states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition—bits of information to be deposited in the students—but rather the organized, systematized, and developed ‘re-presentation’ to individuals of the things about which they want to know more” (Freire, 2000, p. 93). A Big Question, as a focused “re-presentation” of facts, would have to present to groups of students an irresistible encounter, a contradiction that is a true problem for them, that targets their assumptions and beliefs about their lived reality.

For all the contradictions in Sole discourses, this study has shown that commentators have already generated, at least in germ form, the discursive conditions for a globalized problem-posing education: they have suggested that children can achieve mastery of concepts, that a concept can be a concrete formation created in a collaborative moment rather than just an abstract “skill” or “fact” whose apprehension can be quantitatively measured, that learning cannot happen unless it matters to students, and the indispensable role of the granny in converting children into subjects of their material conditions. Such understandings can lead to change only by trimming and consolidating the discourses—commentators have to “get on message” by clearly delineating the Sole concept from other forms of digital education and unschooling. They have to argue for students’ mastery in naming the problem, not just responding to it.

Chapter 6

Summary of Findings and Connections to Theory and Practice

In this chapter, I will summarize and connect my findings about school choice, the ineffective teacher, and School in the Cloud. I will recapitulate some aspects of the Barthesian framework and connect some of the findings of school choice, ineffective teacher, and School in the Cloud along those lines. Then, I will situate this dissertation in the broader field.

6.1 Second-order significations of school reform

Barthes presented a theory of myth as a “second-order sign system,” in which a complete Saussurian sign—a deliberate and conscious connection between a signifier and signified concept—is used to signify some other mythic signified concept. In Barthes’ example of the saluting black French soldier on the magazine cover, readers are aware that “the Negro who salutes is not a symbol of the French Empire:

“he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, indisputable image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to

it fully armed, French imperialism: once made use of, it becomes artificial” (Barthes, 1991, p. 117).

The artificiality of the image does not prevent it from supporting the mythic concept of French imperialism.

This “tamed presence” pervades the articles in this dissertation. In Chapter 3, it turned out that educational needs, learning styles, employment, testing, and empowerment all worked as school choice’s “accomplices.” School choice advocates were able to appropriate these educational traditions because of their history and importance in the field of education. For example, the signs of educational needs and learning styles developed through the activity of education professionals trying to solve a specific problem of individuating instruction. But today, not learning styles the sign but “learning styles” the signifier (devoid of any deeper articulations) is appropriated to signify something about the need for more diverse educational choices (Table 6.1). Likewise, historically, the question of education’s relationship to future employment was deeply contested, but under school choice the concept of educational needs of the student has been naturalized and merged into the needs of employers in the 21st century economy. Students’ needs do the work of “needs,” which in turn signify employers’ needs (Table 6.2).

1. Learning styles	2. Educators’ experience with individuating instruction
3. Sign /	
I. LEARNING STYLES, MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES	II. THE NEED FOR MORE EDUCATIONAL CHOICES
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 6.1: Learning styles as a signifier of choice

Chapter 4 revealed a myth of the ineffective teacher with a Barthesian signification similar to school choice. The ineffective teacher is also itself a mythic sign,

1. Educational needs	2. Historically contested relationship between schools and society	
3. Sign /		
I. EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS		II. THE NEEDS OF EMPLOYERS
III. MYTHIC SIGN		

Table 6.2: Educational needs as a signifier of employers' needs

which various authors used to signify other facets of school reform. For example, New York Governor Cuomo used the shadowy ineffective teacher (and its accomplice, the spineless school administrator) to explain the “baloney” of low scores on state tests.

1. Effective teaching, the “passionate educator”	2. Any number of pedagogical values	
3. Sign /		
I. EFFECTIVE TEACHING		II. HIGHER TEST SCORES, LENGTHEN PRE-TENURE PERIOD
III. MYTHIC SIGN		

Table 6.3: The myth of effective teaching

Table 6.3 shows that the ineffective teacher works a little differently than other mythic figures. Unlike the black soldier, the ineffective teacher is not this storehouse of meanings that are domesticated and appropriated. That role belongs to Lacey Jung’s “passionate educators,” including a teacher

“who single-handedly instills a love of gardening in her three-hour Friday after-school class; master teachers who train others in their free time; teachers who write grant proposals again and again so they can provide additional resources to their students; and teachers who make sure their schools include college nights, astronomy clubs and school beautification days, no matter what. Such teachers will always have a

place in education, and they are why policymakers need to heed teachers on how to move forward from the Vergara decision” (Jung, 2014).

Jung uses this figure to argue that policymakers should collaborate with teachers to “lengthen the time it takes to get tenure; mandate feedback and development programs that help all teachers get better” (Jung, 2014). It is hard to imagine a more perfect correspondence with Barthes’ mythic soldier.

Both myths, school choice and the ineffective teacher, share in appropriating the rich history of American struggles for racial equality. They withdraw more than they contribute to the struggles they claim to belong to. Barthes trains us to look at both orders of signification, the concrete and the mythic, to see how the myth benefits from one side while promoting (“speaking about”) the other. In Table 6.4, school choice advocates claim it is hypocritical for those with choices to deny choice to those who need it—ignoring the question of what benefits choice might confer. The signifier “choice” benefits from a massive network of knowledge of privileges and mechanisms of class reproduction. School choice advocates, far from being ignorant of these privileges and mechanisms, count themselves as caring, compassionate fighters of inequity.

1. Race and class privilege and reproduction	2. Inferior educational experiences for some social groups
3. Sign /	
I. RACE AND CLASS PRIVILEGE AND REPRODUCTION	II. MORE CHOICES
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 6.4: Privilege as a mythic signifier of choice

As for the ineffective teacher, when the *Wall Street Journal* runs an op-ed written by the Vergara plaintiffs’ lawyers titled “Poor children need a new Brown v. Board of Education” (Boutrous & Lipshutz, 2016), they are using the outward sheen of

the *Brown* ruling as a signifier for overturning tenure laws. They are mining the richness of a case that was a culmination of decades of national soul searching, including incremental judicial decisions and foreign policy debates (Dudziak, 2000). The judges heard evidence involving psychological perspectives on the experience of students, which found their experiences inferior despite that “the physical facilities, the curricula, courses of study, qualification and quality of teachers, as well as other educational facilities in the two sets of schools are comparable” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). The facts of the *Vergara* ruling, which showed ineffective teachers being funneled toward poor and minority students in a “dance of the lemons,” were not incorrect—this imagery is, as Barthes reminds us, indisputable. While it may be true that poor children need a new *Brown*, this complexity is not what Boutrous and Lipshutz are signifying. The magic happens when this image is convincingly applied to the project of eradicating the ineffective teacher (Table 6.5). As with school choice advocates, Boutrous and Lipshutz position themselves as “progressive” and “innovative” and on the side of equal rights and public education, and the ineffective teacher threatens these rights.

1. <i>Brown v. Board</i>	2. Overturning doctrine of “separate but equal,” civil rights, desegregation
3. Sign /	
I. <i>BROWN V. BOARD</i>	II. <i>VERGARA V. CALIFORNIA</i>
III. MYTHIC SIGN	

Table 6.5: *Brown* as a mythic signifier of *Vergara*

Now that I have recapped the semiotic mechanisms that connect the myths, we can contrast this mythic appropriation with the School in the Cloud project. In Chapter 5, I mentioned how Sugata Mitra situates his project in the tradition of Plato, Aurobindo, Vygotsky, and Montessori, who are united under the signifiers

of “creativity” and “wonder.” It can be argued that these figures of education history are being appropriated toward signifying the quite unrelated concepts of creativity and wonder (and “imagination” and “resourcefulness”), as in Table 6.6.

1. Plato et al.	2. Centuries-long developments of pedagogic praxis	
3. Sign /		
I. PLATO ET AL.		II. CREATIVITY, WONDER, IMAGINATION, RESOURCEFULNESS
III. MYTHIC SIGN		

Table 6.6: Plato et al. as mythic signifiers of creativity, etc.

But that is not the whole story. For Mitra, creativity and wonder are not ends in the same way that diverse educational settings are an end for school choice advocates. As synonyms (or rather metonyms) for those educational figures, they stand for the “magic of children’s innate quest for information and understanding” (Mitra, 2013b), which Mitra will appropriate toward the greater ends of setting up environments where children can teach themselves (Table 6.7).

1. Creativity and wonder	2. The ordinary meanings of those signifiers	
3. Sign /		
I. CREATIVITY AND WONDER AS INNATE PROPERTIES OF CHILDREN		II. CHILDREN CAN TEACH THEMSELVES, SELF-ORGANIZATION
III. MYTHIC SIGN		

Table 6.7: Creativity and wonder as mythic signifiers of self-organization

The idea that children innately thirst for information and knowledge is fundamentally mythic. According to Mitra, he conceived the idea while observing chil-

dren enjoying his Hole in the Wall station. But Mitra could have drawn any number of conclusions from his observation, such as that computers are fun, kids like communicating with their relatives across town, or kids like listening to stories. Mitra's observational lens must have been predisposed to the "thirst for knowledge" myth, or else it was applied after the fact.

While Mitra uses this idea to justify setting up Soles, they are robust enough that, if it turned out that children do not actually thirst for information and knowledge but rather for ignorance and enjoyment, Soles would not suffer much. In fact, as I have suggested and will elaborate, Soles can unlock an emancipatory potential in contemporary education if they drop the myth of innate thirst for knowledge and focus on the granny's role in channeling children's enjoyment through a kind of transference relationship. By contrast, take away the ineffective teacher (or, better yet, take away the passionate educator), and the testing regime collapses. And, despite that school choice discourse cannot enunciate any concrete benefits that choice confers (outside the completely abstract notion of "learning styles") it would crumble without this support.

Another of Mitra's myths, that schools are obsolete holdovers from the Victorian Era, can be described as a myth "on the Left":

"I have been asked whether there are myths 'on the Left.' Of course, inasmuch, precisely, as the Left is not revolution. Left-wing myth supervenes precisely at the moment when revolution changes itself into 'the Left', that is, when it accepts to wear a mask, to hide its name, to generate an innocent metalanguage and to distort itself into 'Nature'" (Barthes, 1991, p. 147).

Plenty of voices like Mitra and his associate Sir Ken Robinson decry schools for being *run like factories*, according to bell schedules, with students sorted by "date of manufacture," etc. They claim that, in today's age, with information ready at your fingertips, we no longer need graduates to all be stamped with the same skills and knowledge; instead, we need versatile graduates. For Barthes, Left-wing myths

usually have nothing to say about everyday life. Indeed, Mitra's claim is inessential and disconnected from reality and does not offer any real project. The word "obsolete" indicates something that no longer lives up to its function, as if schools are simply driven by the times. "What got us here won't get us *there*" (Mitra, 2013b), that is, the 21st century world of work. Through the metalanguage of "factories," Mitra has distorted the struggles of education into the "nature" of this world.

Fortunately, not all of Mitra's myths are as brimming with bourgeois triteness. Mitra's myths of *education as self-organization* and the *obsolescence of knowledge* are invisible to a Barthesian analysis,¹ but Laclau's definition of myth as "forming a new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of dislocated elements" (Laclau, 1990) can help us see how they enable Mitra's project to be more radical and emancipatory. Laclau's definition of myth is more general than Barthes', which requires that myths domesticate and appropriate historically rich signs toward signifying something else. By Laclau's definition, when Mitra says that education has always been self-organization, these words signal a restructuring of education's disordered elements in a way that school choice and the ineffective teacher do not. Specifically, the elements of educational technology, adult professional ("teacher"), and curriculum are restructured into the Sole, granny, and Big Question, respectively. Moreover, the claim that knowledge is obsolete is more radical than the claim that schools are obsolete. If an institution becomes obsolete, then the "natural" course of action is to invite experts to modernize it. However, if knowledge itself is obsolete, then no expert can exert their authority on the situation. Society will have to contend with what course of action to take if education will be based on something other than knowledge. Mitra's offering to this contest is *education as self-organization*.

¹The signified referents of the signifiers "education" and "knowledge" that Mitra links with self-organization and obsolescence, respectively, are arguably as robust as those concepts as they are referred to by other thinkers. They do not parasitize on those concepts, but address them directly. In this Barthesian sense, I argue that Mitra does not mythologize.

In the terms of Hegel's necessity for "a new mythology," a "mythology of Reason," Mitra has accomplished to a considerable degree the job of expressing his ideas "aesthetically, that is, mythologically" through his "graphic, immediate terms" of education as self-organization built on the innate creativity and wonder of children. He has done so without spending much effort debunking the discourse of his rivals. Mitra's mythology of Reason animates the rest of his discourse (the nuts and bolts of Sole, granny, and Big Question) purposefully. By contrast, Charles Fadel's discourse is ideological, out of control, infinite, not reconciled with its own mythic premises.

Mitra's mythology stands apart from Standards and Accountability and school choice in how its chronology determines its logic of action. While the Standards and Accountability regime presents a narrative in which testing and tenure rules were created in response to the damaging effects of bad teachers, our mythic reading shows a reversed chronology: that the ineffective teacher is an effect and not a cause of the testing regime. This is not to say that there were no "bad teachers" prior to widespread testing; however, the figure of the ineffective teacher, which must be eradicated at all costs, is a structural effect of testing, and it is why more testing can never finally remove it. Likewise, the anxiety about diversifying school choices will only exacerbate as more options are made available, because the problem of access is perpetually re-created by repeated attempts to increase access. Paradoxically, these discourses strengthen the target that they overtly seek to eradicate. Conversely, Mitra uses mythic chronology to his advantage: in insisting that education *has always been* about self-organization and recasting his present-day labors in this light, Mitra's work will perpetually strengthen his belief about the past and its significance for the present.

6.2 Significance to the field of education research

This dissertation has offered a conceptual lens through which to view the myriad news articles about school reform. The framework, which provided units of perception and analysis, informed my method of comparing structures across articles and authors. This method charts the trajectories of educational practices beyond just looking at material production by parsing and organizing the signifiers of education. Following these circulating signifiers—the way they appropriate and colonize each other—is every bit as important to education research as following the circulation of dollars. As such, this dissertation builds on traditions found in journals like *Learning, Media and Technology*, whose offerings debate “the changing nature of knowledge, learning and pedagogy in the digital age” and “how digital media are shaping (and being shaped by) educational practices in local, national and global contexts” (LMT, 2018). Many of that journal’s articles take a critical view of education technology, including the work of Neil Selwyn, whose analytic frameworks I used to assess the possibilities and dangers of Soles. While *Learning, Media and Technology* shies away from “speculation on the future potential of technology in education” (LMT, 2018), by engaging in this type of speculation, my chapter on Soles took the Marcusean step of highlighting what educational practitioners ought to demand of educational technology. Rather than adopt an attitude of debunking, like some research on digital education, my dissertation opts for an attitude of radical naivety: taking the mythic promises of educational technology projects at their word (as Barthes insisted, myths do not lie), and then holding these projects to their promises.

This dissertation also builds on the broad traditions of critical sociology and especially the ideas of Stuart Hall. According to Hall,

“discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images

and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall, 1997, p. 4).

In this vein, my work focuses on how bits of language—signifiers—can take on the function of images, and how institutional actors conduct their work and structure knowledge of this work according to these images. Recall how Charles Fadel’s creative output hinges around a very persuasive image of educational needs (the “4 C’s”), how they are not being met, and how schools can perfectly fill them with more curriculum. Hall argues that, in order for a message to have any impact, it must first be decoded, i.e. actively translated by the listener into something meaningful for them. Decoding always involves an act of interpreting the message in alignment, opposition, or negotiation with wider cultural meanings. But, as Hall is aware, decoding would be meaningless if it occurred solely in the mind of the decoder. It informs that individual’s future action, and hence it cannot be isolated from the encoding process. Fadel’s decoding of curriculum is recirculated in his prodigious work, which is decoded anew by others, like Julia Freeland Fisher (who is ambivalent about the “4 C’s” unless they are of direct utility for students/employers). My work shows that Hall’s concept of “equivalence” between the intentions of sender and receiver is perhaps overstated. In my model, the effects of a discourse are not measured by how they are consciously received by someone else (as “agreement” or “disagreement”), but rather the way in which the assumptions that guide their activity (their mythic bases) direct their activity and others’. Charles Fadel’s and school choice activists’ endless signifiers of curriculum are pervasive because they support and are supported by a widespread belief in the capacity of schools to sufficiently provide children with skills.

To the model of encoding and decoding, my model adds the Barthesian-Hegelian impossible object. I add a “why” to encoding/decoding theory: are discourse users expanding their modes of subjectivity, as Sugata Mitra sometimes does, or are they

aiming for an obsessive stasis? By looking at mythic discourse as a second-order sign system, we can read whether a regime (such as the 4 C's, increased value-added measures, or more minutely subdivided curricular menus) is appropriating signifiers (like "equality" and "needs") toward mythic signified concepts or are authentically contributing to the struggle whose signifiers of which they partake. And then, once the mythic appropriation is identified, we can see if these terms are covering over a signified concept that has no endpoint, such as the pursuit of the "passionate educator" through the eradication of the ineffective teacher. I used this method to identify the true enemy of radical school reform—the bad infinite, which allows educational actors to sacrifice incredible amounts of effort and resources, thereby reproducing themselves as caring, driven subjects of education, while allowing them to ignore the deep societal contradictions which, if they were to face directly, would compel them to alter their modes of subjectivity. In the *Vergara* ruling, evidence of the ineffective teacher's negative effect on children (and the mechanisms that funnel them in front of poor and minority students) "shocked the conscience" of the presiding judge, but this shock would be mild compared to that of facing the historical and structural depth of inequities in American education.

This dissertation contributes a way of judging digital education projects, definite endeavors that resist the bad infinite. The ones that I covered in this dissertation, the Self-Organized Learning Environments and the School in the Cloud, are particularly appealing to me for their ability to untangle mastery and intelligence as explained in Jacques Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière, 1991). Rancière describes this relationship in his historical account of Joseph Jacotot, a French teacher in Belgium in the early 19th century. Jacotot's students managed to learn the French language despite his ignorance of their language, Flemish, rely-

ing on a bilingual text of the French classic *Télémaque* and Jacotot's superhuman charisma.

“The students had learned without a master explicator, but not, for all that, without a master. They didn't know how before, and now they knew how. Therefore, Jacotot had taught them something. And yet he had communicated nothing to them of his science. His mastery lay in the command that had enclosed the students in a closed circle from which they alone could break out. By leaving his intelligence out of the picture, he had allowed their intelligence to grapple with that of the book. Thus, the two functions that link the practice of the master explicator, that of the savant and that of the master, had been dissociated” (Rancière, 1991, pp. 12–13).

In several aspects, this passage can also describe Mitra's projects—first, the fact that grannies and Mitra himself “encourage” but don't explicate (despite that, as educated older people, they clearly know something). Second, they “enclose students in a closed circle” through the tool of the Big Question. Sole students voluntarily subject themselves to the task of satisfying it. Third, they inspire students by directing their attention toward certain objects while radically accepting each student's consequent interactions with them. In Rancière's terms, they allow students' intelligence to grapple with the intelligence of... the Internet. And this last point highlights the key innovation worthy of a 21st century project. In Jacotot's day, grappling with the intelligence of the author of *Télémaque*, the foundational text of the modern French idiom, was the path toward mastery of the idiom itself. In our time, as I mentioned in the the last chapter, the precariousness of work is depriving people all over the world of a world. In the absence of a world, there is also an absence of foundational texts. In a Sole, the emancipating granny would incrementally lead the student to discover a world and a text as the student locates themselves in it.

How different this is from our current regime, in which educational “outcomes” are determined by students' demonstrated intelligence! The definition of a stu-

dent's "success," and the real consequences for that student, hinge on "achievement" of these outcomes. Teachers who respect their students' intelligences, no matter how young, know we cannot control the results of an interaction. To us, the entire game of schooling seems fake, because our job is to set up encounters with objects that will probabilistically lead students toward the "right" outcomes, the "standards." If a teaching method, technology, or indeed a teacher, reliably lead 80% of students toward "80% mastery," then that method, technology, or teacher are considered successful, a model to be replicated. My teaching plan usually began a unit by submitting mathematical objects to students for their consideration, but at some point I had to shift toward "skills you will demonstrate on the exam" to satisfy the requirements of my job. This concept of controlling the outcomes of an intellectual encounter lies at the heart even of warm and fuzzy theories like Multiple Intelligences, which look for individualized "entry points" (Eberstadt, 1999, p. 11) into the curriculum of standards.

This doubt of the existence of a unified world is why, among other reasons, I find conservative pleas for "cultural literacy" unacceptable. Traditionally, literacy indicated an ability to navigate the signs of the world, the problem being that this unified world is no longer viable. The concept of "literacies" advocated by Julia Fisher and Charles Fadel attempts to provide students a toolbox for all possible worlds, but it cannot provide sanity, as it redoubles the fragmented overlapping worlds the student will occupy. The Sole provides an answer to both "cultural literacy" and multiple "literacies," as it enables students to name and order the world they will inhabit. For these reasons, I have a personal resonance with the anarchic Soles. But I would take seriously and apply the mythic treatment to any educational project (and accept, if temporarily, its founding myths) that could dislodge education from its increasing role as handmaiden of the 21st century economy.

This dissertation also contributes to research on the commodification and appropriation of education toward systems of domination. Namely, it provides an example of a way science and technology could be used for something other than addressing the unquenchable demands of capital. In their edited volume *Marcuse's Challenge to Education* (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009), Douglas Kellner and his colleagues describe the philosopher Herbert Marcuse's theory of the "one-dimensional" society, which stated that institutions were increasingly mobilizing scientific and technological forces toward domination and destruction. The solution to this problem could not be more technology; instead, science and technology had to be detangled from oppressive and destructive structures, and the emancipated structures-to-come had to "reconstruct" science and technology (Kellner et al., 2009, p. 21). Kellner et al. describe how the infinite expansion of information and the simultaneous need to, in Marcuse's words, "'contain' knowledge and reason within the conceptual and value universe of the established society" (p. 11) have led to the expansion of professional education and the diminution of the original Enlightenment project of *Bildung*. By the early 1970s, Marcuse already observed that "the council for Higher Education is called upon to study the 'detailed needs' of the established society so that the colleges know 'what kinds of graduates to produce'" (Kellner et al., 2009, p. 11). As I have shown, this idea is alive and well not only in discourses such as Julia Freeland Fisher's "conversations" between higher education and employers, but also in Mitra's talk of whom he would hire if he were the boss.

I am not trying to sell the reader on Soles; my aim has been to describe how to judge this new form of digital education, and *what we should demand of it*. The task of developing new myths in education must extend into core pedagogic relations, i.e. between student and teacher. The stifling discourse *about* digital education parallels the stifling discourse within digital education. An emancipatory pedagogy,

one that is radically “student-centered” (as perhaps a retired educational professional half a world away can provide), would concentrate the student’s “critical reason geared toward overcoming the contradictions of the present” (p. 24). Soles can be a vehicle for reconstructing science and technology around emancipatory pedagogical relations, *provided that* the Big Question impel students toward overcoming their personal and political contradictions through action and reflection.

What can Sugata Mitra teach American educators? We need not abandon our American traditions and convert all our schools into Soles, or even copy or “scale up” particular aspects of Soles. What is needed is to develop our own fantastic kernel on which to develop a pedagogy. To my mind, the biggest failing of the Common Core State Standards has been in aestheticizing its new pedagogy. On a graphical level, the dinky cartoons that graced the pages of my Common Core-based textbook paled in comparison to the systematic graphics of the *SOLE Toolkit* (not to mention the School in the Cloud’s website as a whole), not only in their superficial qualities, but in the way the *Toolkit’s* diagrams and cartoons align conceptually with the kernel of education as self-organization, Big Questions, and creativity and wonder. Moreover, it is easy to remember that Soles are about education as self-organization and unlocking the creativity and wonder in children, but one would be hard pressed to come up with a similar description for Common Core. The website’s front-page claim that “Common Core State Standards provide clear and consistent learning goals to help prepare students for college, career, and life” gives no indication as to why they are needed and how they are different from anything else. The question, “What is Common Core?” is so difficult to answer that its creators think it necessary to link to “Myths vs. facts” on their home page! No such debunking is necessary for Soles, because Soles are already unabashedly mythical. While Mitra does a fair amount of *denouncing* the Victorian practices, this is only in the service of *announcing* his school-to-come.

Developing a mythic kernel for a new American pedagogy is difficult and beyond the scope of this dissertation. First of all, it is clear that the fantasy of global competitiveness (based on 21st century meta-skills) is almost certainly unsuitable as a founding myth. Further, it is difficult to imagine a charismatic statesman providing this pedagogic kernel—what could yet another candidate for “education president” offer? Mythologizing teachers as superheroes does not work, either. One answer lies in reconstructing the essence of American education, the one-room schoolhouse. The diametrical opposition to the “unbundled competencies” of the present, this project would make the teacher the supreme master of a child’s education. It would offer a complete aesthetic package that draws from a reserve of popular imagination similarly to the School in the Cloud and completely unlike Common Core. One branch of the unschooling movement is already reconstructing this ideal by pooling together the resources of groups of homeschoolers and bringing in education professionals. Such a process could eventually supersede the present institution of American public schooling.

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