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Newspaper Constructions of the COVID-19 Learning Loss

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Abstract

Learning loss due to the pandemic has become a significant global concern. The purpose of this paper is to understand the newspaper coverage of the COVID-19 learning loss. Critical discourse analysis is utilized to analyze (N = 38) newspaper articles. Results include: constructions of youth identities, racialized constructions of youth identities, factualized portrayals of learning loss, and the neoliberal narrative. The pandemic crisis narrative was used to promulgate fear and reinforce the deficit-based portrayals of youth learning. Generalized learning deficiencies and disproportionate impact led to racialized portrayals of loss, stigmatizing youth through de-contextualized and ahistorical representations. Factualized portrayals of learning loss took shape through linguistical structure, word choices, data-based emphasis, and an expert narrative. Discourse depicted as fact undergirded the neoliberal narrative and justified the need for increased testing and reform in schools. Implications of the analysis and recommendations to elevate support and strengthen youth voices are discussed.

> "We don't want to punish students who were affected by the pandemic, but at the same time we can't reward those who didn't do anything"
> – Superintendent [*Chicago Daily Herald*, Article 1]

Newspaper Constructions of the COVID-19 Learning Loss

In January of 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared a global pandemic. Within four months, a research brief funded by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) – a dominant, not-for-profit educational assessment company working in over 9,500 schools – deployed the phrase "learning loss" to describe math and reading deficits for students based on statistical projections (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). In other words, estimates were made to *predict* student declines in math and reading. This research set the stage for a wave of deficit-based depictions of student learning during the pandemic. The ominous media depictions contributed to hundreds of billions in U.S. funding via the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. The plan included 122 billion dollars for K-12 schools, requiring state education agencies to spend 5%, and districts 20% – specifically to address learning loss (Jordan, 2021). Importantly, "learning loss" was written directly into the legislation.

Discourse surrounding the COVID-19 learning loss is part and parcel of a long and consistent trend in perpetuating student deficits and using fear-based tactics to justify the need for education reform. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) ushered in financially motivated thinking (i.e., business ideology) into the educational sector by framing academic achievement as a necessary component of economic prosperity (Gabriel & Lester, 2011). Title 1 components of ESEA offered funding to schools with a higher proportion of lower socioeconomic students, however schools were required to provide data to measure and evaluate improvements – primarily achieved through standardized testing (Sacks, 1999). ESEA initiated a paradigm of "objective" testing to understand and address academic inequality, while justifying the categorization and comparison of students based upon standardized test scores (Sacks, 1999).

In 1966, Equality of Educational Opportunity was published – more prominently known as the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966). Coleman emphasized that the individual attributes of students played a greater role in academic achievement than school facilities and staff. These findings shifted the focus away from school systems – blaming communities, families, and students for academic inequality. This seminal report was published during the Civil Rights Movement, yet the study neglected any discussion of racism and the impact on academic inequality. In 1983, A Nation at Risk was published, which continued the fear-based educational trends by slandering public school systems through the grim portrayal of student mediocrity (Gardner, 1983). In the years to follow, federal legislation would build upon this framework, paving the way for privatization and corporate educational reform – solidifying the allegiance to high-stakes, standardized testing (Au, 2010; Garrison, 2018; Ravitch, 2016).

Educational legislation and independently commissioned studies accomplished two goals that changed the landscape of school systems. First, they positioned a need for reform by showcasing the deficits of students and public school systems – the very schools that were already neglected and underfunded by the government (Zhao, 2016). Second, the fear-based tactics associated with a sensationalized academic achievement gap fueled policy creation and privatized reform, including charter schools, school choice, vouchers, enhanced accountability, and

standardized testing (Au, 2010; Logan, 2018; Sacks, 1999; Ravitch, 2016; Zhao, 2016). These fear-based trends have been a recurring theme with subsequent U.S. legislation, including the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), Race to the Top (2009), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) – all which increased the school's reliance on high-stakes testing and corporate educational reform (Kovacs & Christie, 2008; Ravitch, 2016). Over time, school systems have steadily increased the emphasis on academic performance, skill development, meritocracy, and corporate education reform, while relinquishing support for student well-being (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Garrison, 2018; Kovacs, 2010; Slater & Seawright, 2015; Zhao, 2021b).

The ensuing neoliberalism has been swift and persistent – cast under the guise of a solvable academic achievement gap – with substantial privatization of public school services and massive increases in charter schools (Au, 2010; Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Giroux, 2009; Klein, 2007; Saltman, 2015). Privatization in public schools has been widespread, with two prominent themes to note. First, efforts to "accelerate learning", offer "high-quality tutoring", and provide "testing and accountability" have strategically created a need for enhanced mechanisms of privatization (Au, 2010; Saltman, 2015). Specifically, the widespread use of testing and assessments, increased prevalence of education consulting groups, curriculum reform efforts, pedagogical software, and high-quality tutoring, all benefit corporate educational interests (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Baltodano, 2012; Kovacs, 2010; Sondel et al., 2015).

Second, trends to "increase safety" have proliferated the use of school surveillance tactics through the use of security cameras, metal detectors, digital fingerprinting, online monitoring, digital technology, and school resource officers (police) (Taylor, 2018; Welch & Payne, 2018). Advocates of surveillance argue that ensuring safety is a necessary component of academic achievement, although research has identified that these mechanisms often further alienate youth (Garver & Noguera, 2012; Kupchik, 2016). In both of these avenues, the media played a substantial role in promoting fear to justify a need for privatized educational reform (Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Taylor, 2018). Furthermore, the increasing trends toward academic skill development and surveillance mechanisms have intertwined systems of capitalism and racism, ultimately amplifying the oppression and exclusion of systematically excluded youth (Casella, 2018).

The increasing school reliance on privatized mechanisms, including testing and accountability often reduces learning, student knowledge, and teacher skills down to a mere evaluation of test scores (Gee, 2017; Zhao, 2017; Zhao, 2021b). Student evaluation continues to overshadow the enduring inequities that are widespread in schools and often amplified by standardized testing (Au, 2010). Test scores are often implicitly driven through the notion that test score variations are a product of individual level student differences in intelligence. Thus, differences in test scores may lead to decontextualized misinterpretations of data that may perpetuate the benefits and rewards to dominant, wealthy, and mostly White students (Au, 2010). That is, scores are largely a product of socio-economic class differences rather than differences in individual student intelligence (Garrison, 2015). Additionally, there are limitations to the validity and presumed objectivity of these measurements. For instance, the origins of the testing movement stem from intelligence testing and the racist eugenics movement, both of which bolstered the *false* narrative that White men were the most intelligent and most fit for survival (Bergman, 2011). Further, these tests are often driven by assumptions of scoring objectivity, which circumvents considerations of bias amidst test questions and scoring metrics (Sacks, 1999; Ravitch, 2016; Zhao, 2017). Additional concerns of validity arise due to cross-cohort comparisons to previous year students and decontextualized data – a strategy prominently used in learning loss research (Au,

2010; Dorn et al., 2020a-b; Kuhfeld et al., 2020a-d; Sacks, 1999). Furthermore, the sustained allegiance to testing and accountability perpetuates a deficit-based mindset of students, often disproportionately impacting students historically marginalized by their identities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valencia, 2010; Zhao, 2021b).

COVID-19 Learning Loss

Amidst the existing context of increasing privatization, neoliberal reform, and deficit-based framing of students rooted in racist and classist biases, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in March of 2020. The pandemic has been omnipresent over two challenging years and through peaks and valleys of infection and death rates, we are now beginning to grapple with the enduring nature of COVID-19. As research on student learning during the pandemic unfolded, the neoliberal narrative was immediately illuminated. Coe & Kuttner (2018) offer relevant contextual analysis, as they note the general underrepresentation of education coverage in television news media. Importantly they note, "this limited overall attention to education makes those stories that do get covered all the more important for potentially setting the public agenda". Additionally, scholarly activity has identified the neoliberal tactics of operationalizing disaster to set a political agenda. New Orleans – post hurricane Katrina – offers a prime example of disaster-based political agenda setting, where a massive reconfiguration of the school system – switching from public to charter – was seized as a corporate opportunity to advance neoliberal educational reform (Giroux, 2009; Saltman, 2015). Klein (2007) discusses this tactic as "the shock doctrine", entailing a disorienting experience such as a catastrophic event that is used to manipulate and reconfigure policies toward neoliberal prerogatives. The global shock associated with the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be fodder for the developing research of learning loss. A brief review of some of the key actors driving this discourse helps underscore this point.

Many studies, reports, and research briefs associated with the COVID-19 learning loss were led by corporate leaders with strategic interests in educational privatization, including the Opportunity for Economic and Community Development (OECD), the World Bank, and corporate leaders in education and consulting groups, including Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) and McKinsey & Company (Dorn et al., 2020a-b; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020a-d; World Bank, 2020). All of these organizations have substantial ties to economically rooted educational reform efforts. For example, all of these organizations contribute to the global testing movement associated with the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA has become a global phenomenon, testing upwards of 600,000 youth across 79 countries, driven by sensationalized news reporting, fueling enhanced nation-state competition, and policy creation (Klees et al., 2012; Verger et al., 2018).

With these points in mind, this study is oriented toward dissecting the media's influence to better understanding the learning loss discourse. The purpose of this study is to understand newspaper coverage of the COVID-19 learning loss. To do this, mainstream newspaper article coverage of learning loss are analyzed to detect any neoliberal narratives, assessments of youth learning, and academic achievement during the pandemic. Mainstream newspaper articles are analyzed in the context of three research questions.

1. How do newspaper articles construct youth identities in the discursive narratives of learning loss?

2. To what extent do articles consider and represent histories, inequities, and contextual factors of learning as relevant to the overall depictions of learning loss?
3. Do the representations of learning loss privilege or marginalize certain interests (i.e., certain youth identities, corporate interests, scholarly research)?

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory

This study is grounded with a foundational lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Historically, educational systems have sustained a longitudinal stature embedded with systemic oppression and racism (Dixson et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In the context of enduring academic and behavioral inequities, CRT helps to situate analysis through an array of theoretical tenets. The tenets operationalized for this study include whiteness as property, the permanence of racism, intersectionality, and counter-narratives. In consideration of the newspaper representations of the COVID-19 learning loss, CRT is useful to examine what structural and systemic factors associated with race, diversity, and pre-existing educational inequities are represented or ignored. Whiteness as property allows for an examination of how privilege evolves into more pronounced ideological power (Harris, 1993). For example, in what ways do article representations reify whiteness or strive to uproot dominant narratives and status quo? The permanence of racism allows for an examination of undergirding themes of racism, enabling reflection of learning loss discourse in the context of enduring educational inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). For instance, are pre-existing inequities in schools offered to help contextualize and explain the state of student learning during the pandemic. Intersectionality frames the influence of marginalization that may occur based upon compounded domains of oppression and overlap with systemically oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 2017). In this study, the intersectionality tenet is used to examine how oppression is reinforced and whether newspaper article narratives vary across youth identities. Finally, counter-narratives help to circumvent the dominant societal narratives and status quo–and are useful to assess underrepresented points of views (Bell, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2004). In this study, counter-narratives may contextualize whether youth perspectives are privileged or disregarded. Collectively, the tenets of CRT offer important contextual and historical points of reference necessary for understanding the learning loss discourse.

Deficit-Based Ideology

Critical race theory helps to situate the historical context surrounding race and diversity in schools, meanwhile the prevalence of deficit-based ideology is also necessary to situate contextually and historically. Valencia (2010) discusses deficit-based thinking as the absence of systemic explanations for school failure, leading to a focal point on student skills and intelligence as explanatory factors of success or failure in schools. Deficit-based thinking is operationalized in this study to explore the constructions of youth identities, and how articles adhere to deficit-based narratives, or offer varying degrees of representation. Consistent with the historical trends surrounding race and diversity in schools, deficit-based thinking also has a long trajectory of influence. Specifically, the links between deficit-based thinking and standardized tests are well established (Au, 2010; Garrison, 2018). Meanwhile, the constructions of youth through well-intentioned reform, categorizations, and tiered systems of support (e.g., at-risk) also fundamentally

serve to reify student deficits and focus reform toward correcting student behavior (Borstein, 2015; Love & Beneke, 2021; Valencia, 2010). The intersecting relevance of critical race theory and deficit-based ideology will be illuminated throughout the body of this manuscript. Understanding any contemporary school problem must be historically grounded and contextualized by the longstanding trends in schools.

Researcher Subjectivity

The author of this paper is a White male doctoral student in the field of social work. The aims of this paper developed in response to the deficit-based trends of learning loss. Generally, my research focuses on upending pathologizing perspectives and practices in schools by bolstering the focus on equity. Additionally, my scholarship analyzes media representations to understand the potential relationship and impact on school systems and students. This paper does not argue for or against the validity of learning loss. Rather, I aim to convey how the learning loss discourse as represented in the media has mobilized neoliberal practices and policies across the United States. Further, as the neoliberal narrative spreads, youth are the causality of ongoing media discourse that conveys rampant deficit-based depictions of youth and policy reform with a hyper-focus on standardized testing. In my view, students need support in post-pandemic schools through inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive approaches that outline strengths, unique skills, and compassion for their lived experiences.

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to analyze newspaper article representations of the COVID-19 learning loss. Techniques of CDA help to connect language to power and offer utility for promoting social justice and societal change (Jen et al., 2021; Willey-Sthapit et al., 2020). Gee (2004) describes discourse as the text that relates intimately to syntax. In other words, how structure and order combine to paint an overall picture. Critical discourse analysis can occur by relating the sequence of sentences (discourse) to social context (Gee, 2004; Gee, 2007; Gee, 2010; Gee, 2017). In addition, CDA can illuminate the constructions of discourse that contribute to social problems, including ongoing inequitable and deficit-based educational practices (Annamma et al., 2019; Gee, 2017).

One technique to analyze discourse is through the application of Gee's (2010) seven building steps. Gee's seven building steps entail: *significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge* (Gee, 2004; Gee, 2010). The application of Gee's seven building steps represents an important point of overlap with the theoretical framework. Specifically, seven building steps are useful to contextualize and further comprehend discourse. With this in mind, the theoretical framework provides a balanced overlay to unearth discourse amidst necessary historical and contextual context. In this study, the seven building steps are used in analytical cohesion with critical race theory and deficit-based ideology.

Gee's seven building steps have been previously utilized by scholars to uncover covert forms of racism on behalf of White families which perpetuate educational segregation (Sugrue, 2019). That is, Sugrue (2019) used the combined methodology of CDA and CRT to examine a seemingly innocuous recess petition, underscoring how narratives of school belonging were used to privilege and sustain the power of White families. Additionally, Annamma and colleagues (2019), used CDA and CRT to illuminate the subjective nature of school disciplinary action against

Black girls (Annamma et al., 2019). Furthermore, the framework of CDA, CRT, and deficit-based ideology may be a viable route to unearth the deficit-based constructions of youth identities that may undergird the COVID-19 learning loss discourse.

Data & Sample

The Nexis Uni database was utilized to identify and obtain newspaper articles published between January 1, 2019 and May 1, 2021, obtaining the phrases "COVID-19" and "learning loss", and sectioned as educational content. In light of the substantial federal funding associated with the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the selection of newspaper articles predominantly focused on U.S. articles. In total, three U.S. based newspapers were selected. Selection criteria was also impacted by database options, including location of articles on learning loss, and organizational prestige. Newspapers selected include: *The New York Times, Chicago Daily Herald,* and the *Los Angeles Times.* Initially, 211 articles were gathered, and after review the sample was reduced to (*N* = 38) after 173 articles were excluded due to lack substantive content or international context. Next, articles were downloaded from Nexis Uni and uploaded to Dedoose Analytic Software (8.3.43) to complete the analytical process. Appendix A details all articles analyzed.

Data Analysis

An inductive analytic approach was used to assess newspaper article renderings of the COVID-19 learning loss. Figure 1 outlines the analytical flowchart described below.

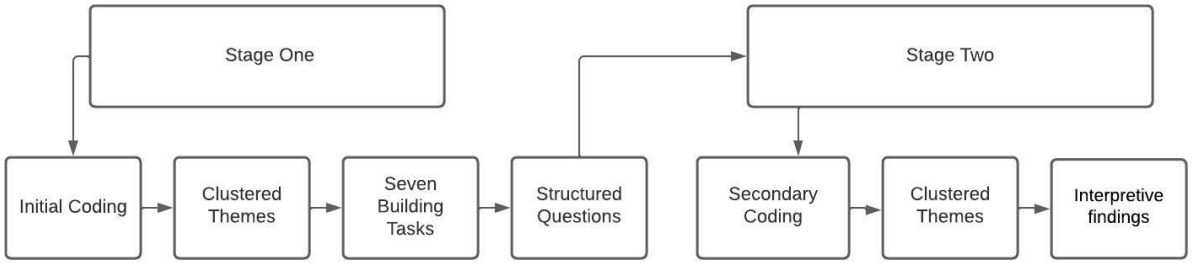

Figure 1. Critical Discourse Analysis Flowchart

Stage one of the coding process began with initial coding and detailed memos for each newspaper article analyzed (Saldaña, 2021). Initial coding begins the iterative process of analysis by gathering concepts before moving to assess overall discursive patterns (Saldaña, 2021). The initial coding stage is useful to familiarize oneself with the data and facilitate clustered coding techniques. Examples codes from the initial stage of coding include: specific skills lost; skills gained; disproportionate impact; reform needed; and justifications for standardized testing. Second, clustered coding techniques were used to move strategically from the initial stage of coding to generate substantive themes of content, in addition to capturing themes of discursive absence (Saldaña, 2021; Richardson, 2006). Discursive absence entails important contextual discourse not illuminated in articles and how this absence changes the meaning of the remaining linguistical structure (Richardson, 2006). Next, initial coding techniques and clustered theme development are used to inform the application of Gee's seven building tasks (Gee, 2004). The

theoretical framework and seven building tasks are used to contextualize and unravel themes of dominant discourse. From the developing iterative process, structured questions (Table 1) are posed to guide the second stage of analysis.

Stage two includes phases of re-coding or re-categorization of codes, as informed through the iterative process (Saldaña, 2021). That is, all texts are analyzed for a second time, as informed by the structured questions previously delineated. This process leads to an additional stage of clustered theme development and concludes with an interpretative analytical process, informed and guided by theory. For added clarity, Appendix B outlines an example of the full discourse analysis process, with Figure 1B offering a visual representation of the analytical steps.

Table 1
Critical Discourse Analysis: Structured Questions

Structured Question	**Seven Building Steps**
1. How do power structures shape the learning loss discourse (e.g., organizations, government, privatization efforts, expert quotes, journalistic ideologies, and privileged voices)?	• Practices • Identities • Connections • Relationships • Politics
2. How are relationships and discourse linked across articles?	• Identities • Relationships • Connections • Politics • Sign systems and knowledge
3. What is the scope of discursive absence across articles?	• Significance • Identities • Politics • Connections • Sign systems and knowledge

Structured questions were used to illuminate discursive framing, explore linguistical choices, identify privileged voices, and uncover relationships to power structures. Additionally, structured questions are useful to build upon the iterative interpretations developing throughout the coding process, before moving toward theoretical considerations and implications (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). After structured questions were formed, a second stage of analysis ensued, leading to a final interpretative stage. The final interpretive stage offers discursive interpretations, framed within the greater societal context, and themes of discursive absence.

Results

Results in this section are based upon the analysis of 38 newspaper articles published in *The Chicago Herald* (45%), *The New York Times* (34%), and *The Los Angeles Times* (21%).

Utilizing critical discourse analysis, with a sensitizing theoretical framework of critical race theory and deficit-based ideology, four prominent themes developed: (a) constructions of youth identities, (b) racialized constructions of youth identities, (c) factualized portrayals of learning loss, and (d) the neoliberal narrative.

Constructions of youth identities underscore the deficit-based and at-risk portrayals of youth, and how learning (both success and failure) are discursively connected to youth identities. Next, the racialized constructions of youth identities build on and intertwine with the initial constructions of youth identities and include themes of race and diversity, and simplistic narratives of disproportionate impact of learning loss. Factualized portrayals of learning loss includes discursive representations that convey concrete and validated notions of loss, rather than explicating research and searching to understand student learning. Then, the neoliberal narrative illuminates dominant ideology, corporate thinking, and discourse that justifies the perpetuation of privatization and standardized testing.

In the following section, all four themes are independently explicated, although these themes should be understood as intertextually related. That is, the constructions of youth identities (e.g., deficit-based) intertwine to influence the racialized constructions of youth identities (e.g., most disadvantaged). Meanwhile, as the conglomerate representation builds and discursively intersects with the factualized representations of learning loss (e.g., have fallen behind), the neoliberal narrative (e.g., more testing) is framed as the only solution to an overarching portrayal of youth failure. The intertextual relationship across themes portrays a conglomerate narrative of deficit-based constructions of youth – conveying fear and validating learning loss. Table 2 provides code frequencies by newspaper source.

Table 2
Code Frequencies by Source

	Chicago Herald **N (%)**	***New York Times*** **N (%)**	***Los Angeles Times*** **N (%)**	**Total N (%)**
Constructions of youth identities	9 (20)	6 (17)	1 (.04)	16 (42)
Racialized constructions of youth identities	5 (11)	5 (14)	3 (25)	13 (34)
Factualized portrayals of learning loss	7 (41)	10 (29)	5 (23)	22 (57)
Neoliberal narrative	5 (15)	6 (17)	3 (14)	14 (36)
Total	26 (68)	27 (71)	12 (72)	

Constructions of Youth Identities

Constructions of youth identities took shape through deficit-based language with phrases including: “at-risk”, “vulnerable”, “disadvantaged”, “struggling to keep up”, and “most vulnerable” (see Appendix C Table 1C). Deficit-based constructions were widely generalized–evidenced with phrases such as: “children are suffering”, “COVID generation” and “permanent

educational scarring". Importantly, these discursive portrayals utilized overwhelming themes of fear and disaster associated with the pandemic. Article 29 stated:

> Students *at all levels* ***have suffered*** academically since the Los Angeles Unified School District close its campuses more than a year ago, with the ***greatest harm*** falling on younger ones and those who were faring worse before the pandemic.

Article 29 relied heavily on a report published by "Great Public Schools Now", with the journalist framing this organization as a "local advocacy group". Investigation into this "advocacy group" reveals that they are owned and funded by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. In 2015, a Los Angeles Times article pointed out that this non-profit was formed to strategically advocate for the advancement of charter schools – cast masterfully under the guise of "Great Public Schools Now" (Blume, 2015). The neoliberal narrative will be further explicated later in the results section. Article 29 went on to state: "More than 13,000 middle and high school students ***consistently disengaged*** in fall 2020. An additional 56,000 did not actively participate on a daily basis." Not only is it unclear what "consistently disengaged" entails, but it's a woefully stigmatizing portrayal placing blame for disengagement entirely onto youth. Both of the quotes cited above are strategically highlighted with bolded font to underscore the factualized constructions of discourse that utilized disaster sensationalism to validate learning loss and construct youth through a lens of deficiency. Giroux (2009) discusses this type of discursive framing as the biopolitics of neoliberalism and disposability, whereby compassion for youth is replaced by strategic corporate interests, an absence of social justice, and deficit-based constructions of youth.

Deficit-based constructions of youth identities were pervasive in newspaper textual representations, however article titles utilized rhetoric to pose questions and draw the reader in. Specifically, Article 12: *Does it Hurt Children to Measure Pandemic Learning Loss?*, and Article 14: *Do you think you have experienced 'Learning Loss' During the Pandemic?* Importantly, these articles operationalized rhetorical counter-narratives to question the dominant discursive trends surrounding learning loss, however the discourse in both articles ultimately reinforced the deficit-based constructions of youth. Article 12 began by stating: "***Research shows*** many young children ***have fallen behind*** in reading and math. But some educators are worried about stigmatizing an entire generation." This opening phrase seemingly offers a balanced appraisal of the learning loss. A closer examination reveals the discursive phrasing that leans toward validated learning loss as factual. For example, "*research shows"* is used to convey trust and expert ideology to the reader, which is immediately followed up by a factualized portrayal of youth as "have fallen behind". Even when the discourse moves to a contrary perspective, it is met with skepticism with the phrase, "*some* educators". These tactics that lean the reader toward a belief in learning loss are further reinforced throughout the article. For example, the article goes on to state:

> Studies continue to show that amid school closures and economic and health hardships of the past year, many young children have missed out on mastering fundamental reading and math skills. The Biden Administration has told most states that unlike 2020, they should plan on testing students this year, in part to measure the educational inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic [Article 12].

The aforementioned quote leaves a lot to unpack. First, the quote begins by noting "studies continue to show", which conveys evidence of learning loss. However, as the article progresses they only cite working papers (i.e., non-peer reviewed) that are funded by or associated with education consulting groups – the purveyors of standardized testing. Next, the paragraph moves

from a factualized depiction of learning loss and deficit-based depictions of youth (i.e., "have missed out"), to expert portrayals (i.e., Biden Administration) used to justify learning loss and valorize a need for more testing. Finally, exacerbated inequities are also factualized in the final sentence of the paragraph, offering proof of disparities without evidence, noting the path forward toward reform must emphasize more testing. Sensationalized and stigmatizing depictions filled Article 12, evidenced by phrases of "research shows", "have fallen behind", "most children missed out", "most at risk", and a slew of rhetorical phrases used to reinforce the dominant status quo of learning deficits including: "It all sometimes feels like too much to bear".

In similar discourse, Article 9 noted: "We don't have a clear picture on ***how much*** learning loss students ***have*** experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic." The article emphasis on not understanding "how much" learning loss has occurred serves as confirmation of learning loss while underscoring a need to gather more data. Meanwhile, the discursive underestimation of learning loss is a statement that signifies the reality of learning loss, while doing so outside the context of any need for research to confirm these findings. In this instance, the mere statement of "*how much learning loss"* is enough for discursive validation.

The discursive constructions of youth reveal generalized and stigmatizing portrayals, meanwhile the impact may be unequally distributed onto youth identities. Bringing to light pre-existing educational inequities, including the preponderance of stereotypes, biases, racism, and oppression in schools, the generalized depictions of learning loss may be more likely to be cast upon youth historically marginalized by their identities. For example, when reflecting on behavioral inequities in the classroom, exclusionary discipline practices are more often utilized to discipline minoritized youth, often for subjective, non-violent infractions of misbehavior (Allen, 2017; Annamma et al., 2019; Neal-Jackson, 2020). Disciplinary practices implicate the role of stigma, biases, and stereotypes, therefore as the constructions of youth are cast out by way of learning loss, it is less likely for privileged youth to be impacted by such sentiment. Disciplinary practices may seem like an unrelated example when considering the impact of learning loss. However, the effects of learning loss may be reinforced by pre-existing practices, ideologies, and disparate treatment of youth – and may be more severe for racial and ethnic minoritized groups (Giroux, 2009).

Racialized Constructions of Youth Identities

Building upon the constructions of youth identities and equally concerning were the racialized constructions of youth identities – often delivered in generalized discursive tactics. For example, articles often noted disproportionate experiences of learning loss for minoritized youth, including, Black, Hispanic/Latino/a, and Native American students [Articles 18 & 23]. Article 18 stated, "It's been a tough and challenging year." Mr. Natay said. "A lot of learning loss has occurred for this group." This article offers a factualized, under-clarified, and disproportionate depiction of learning loss. As previously noted, the discourse of learning loss may pose an unequal impact on youth, however adding to the problematic constructions are the generalized depictions of disproportionate impact. Meanwhile, Article 23 noted, "What we've seen statistically is that Black and Latino students are disproportionately experiencing learning loss." Table 2C in Appendix C offers a full list of catch phrases and discursive tactics that encapsulated the racialized constructions of youth identities.

It is important to note how biases and stereotypes can be easily reinforced through vague, stigmatizing, and racialized portrayals of youth identities (Annamma, 2017; Neal-Jackson, 2020). Thus, the well-intentioned discourse seeking to describe learning loss deficits may promulgate harm through generalized, under-clarified, and blanketed depictions of learning loss for Black and Brown youth. This is especially problematic discourse in the context of enduring educational inequities and oppressive trends in school systems (Morris, 2016). Furthermore, when racially minoritized students were referenced in articles it was often through generalized depictions of disadvantage – briefly alluding to the structural impact on learning – with phrases of "*struggling to keep up*", "*disadvantaged impact*", "*Learning loss has been enormous for disadvantaged children",* "*most disadvantaged*", "*furthest behind*", and "*disproportionate learning loss*" [Articles 1; 7; 9; 11; 18; 23 & 29; See Table 2C]. While these articles may have alluded to structural disadvantages facing racially minoritized youth, they were also limited in their descriptiveness of the problem. In other words, the over-generalized depictions (e.g., "disadvantaged impact") is framed around youth deficits because it minimizes differential impact, labels all racially minoritized youth as disadvantaged, and fails to elaborate on what these discursive phrases actually mean. Article 6 offered a stigmatizing depiction of youth and families, stating:

> The willingness to place a child in the care of a relative in another country in the middle of a pandemic, she said, "tells you about ***unmet need and desperation***." By adding a level of complication to remote learning, the pattern *has the potential to* ***compound*** learning loss, **experts say,** *particularly* in poor and minority communities ***already plagued by achievement gaps.***

As youth relocate to be with family during a tumultuous pandemic, any explanations of these scenarios that are offered outside of the context of youth and family perspectives are not helpful, and, are in fact, actively harmful. Additionally, these descriptions tell you nothing about the conditions and experiences of that family, other than a relocation occurred. Further, these sensationalized depictions of youth relocation are used as a mechanism to validate learning loss, ultimately reinforced by common discursive tactics including, "experts say", and "compounded learning loss". Meanwhile, any "compounded" form of learning loss not only reifies the existence of learning loss, but validates a longitudinal impact – which is, in fact, unevidenced. Finally, the phrase, "plagued by academic achievement gaps" is displayed outside of the context of systemic or structural explanations of inequity, ultimately reducing student achievement to a dichotomy of privileged *versus* marginalized (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Importantly, the racialized constructions of youth identities should be understood intertextually – in concert with the generalized constructions of youth identities. That is, when generalized and stigmatizing portrayals of racially minoritized youth are used in text, this was often an extension of and building on the deficit-based narratives associated with learning loss. Meanwhile, the racialized representations of youth may be problematically interpreted by the reader through a historical lens of systemic racism, serving to validate the negative sentiment regarding racially minoritized youth (Gillborn, 2008). Meanwhile, the pandemic served to both negatively construct youth identities and offer an explanation of learning loss. Specifically, the pandemic seemed to be the only explanation of learning loss, whereby no prior context or pre-existing educational structure was necessary to convey. Alternative explanations of learning loss were seemingly reduced to blanketed, generalized depictions, including "disproportionate learning loss" or "disadvantaged impact". Some articles mildly emphasized structural factors of pandemic learning, however the over-generalized portrayals of learning loss may reinforce the pre-existing

deficit-based ideology regarding racially minoritized youth. Collectively, the discourse may validate a reductionist portrayal of very complex time for students during the pandemic.

Factualized Portrayals Learning Loss

The generalized and, at times, racialized constructions of youth identities were consistently reinforced by factualized portrayals of learning loss. The majority of newspapers participated in these strategies, with key terms including: "pupils *are* lagging behind", "have experienced [loss]", "*experiencing* learning loss", "*lots* of learning loss, "*large* amounts of loss", "*precious* data", "*real depth* of learning loss", and "children *have* fallen behind" (See Appendix C Table 3C). This discourse crucially reads as *factualized*, rather than a presentation of proposed statistical analysis or projections of learning loss. Meaning-making derived from the reader is that of student deficiencies amidst prominently de-contextualized discourse. Meanwhile, generalized depictions of learning loss were used to portray a generation of students as academically behind. The over-emphasis on *performance* and academics during a time of international crisis underscores a consistent and pervasive trend in education that lends itself to rely on skill emphasis, human capital promotion, and standardized testing (Camphuijsen & Levatino, 2021; Garrison, 2018). Furthermore, the factualized statements about academic performance were largely based on projections of learning loss, however articles often reduced discourse to narratives of "research shows" and "experts say".

In speaking of funding mechanisms to combat the challenges of the pandemic, Article 2 noted concern over the scope of funding, stating: "But it's *not comprehensive* and *does not* provide the level of *transformative money needed to mitigate the effects* of *learning loss* ***long-term***." Importantly, this quote proposes a potential long-term impact of learning loss, although research has yet to allude to such a consequence stemming from statistical projections of learning deficits. Further, in reference to mitigating the effects of learning loss, again the deficits of student learning are conveyed through a factualized and unobjectionable lens of discourse.

An array of tactics were used to engender trust with the reader when conveying learning loss research. Articles often cited working papers, preliminary research, and other non-peer reviewed sources, yet swiftly circumvented any limitations of this research. Article 12 noted,

> A *preliminary* national study of ***98,000*** students from Policy Analysis for California Education, an *independent group* with ties to ***several large universities,*** found that as of late fall, second graders were 26 percent behind where they would have been, *absent the pandemic*, in their ability to read aloud accurately and quickly. Third graders were 33 percent behind.

Trust with the reader is engendered through several tactics in the previous quote. First, the reveal of a large sample size, "an independent research" group, and the ties with "several large universities" all boost the overall perceptions of research validity. Also important is the phrase, "absent the pandemic" whereby the pandemic is offered as a causal explanation of their findings. Meanwhile, clarity of their research methodology, including how their findings were generated are not revealed. Article 3 also cited research from Policy Analysis for California:

> The analysis, ***perhaps the most comprehensive*** in California to date, is based on assessments from a sample that included 50,000 students from 18 school districts. The research also indicated that some ***higher-income students had learning gains***

> – *accelerating* an ***already steep learning gap*** between those with more and fewer resources, according to Policy Analysis for California Education, a nonpartisan research center based at Stanford University.

In the segment above, learning loss is validated through the discourse of, "perhaps the most comprehensive" analysis to date. Next, the dichotomized depiction of learning loss is revealed. That is, higher-income students were shown to have learning gains, thus privileging wealthy students, stigmatizing students with less resources, and underscoring income as the explanatory difference in variations of learning. Structural or systemic explanations for their dichotomized depiction of learning loss are not offered, resulting in an implicit notion of individual responsibility for variations in learning. In consideration of structural factors and systemic biases, it is exactly these type of narratives that can exacerbate the inequitable treatment of racial and ethnic minoritized youth through misperceptions and under-clarified narratives of research (Valencia, 2010). Finally, Policy Analysis for California Education provides a list of recent funders on their website and first on their list is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – an entity with major investments and stake in the educational privatization movement (Garrison, 2015; Kovacs, 2010; PACE, 2022). As a paradigm shift is created through the discourse of learning loss, these kinds of conflicts of interest are consistently kept under wraps.

Collectively, the articles in this analysis relied heavily on citing research, often working papers and preliminary analysis, and quoting experts often with minimal attention paid to the sources of data (i.e., assessment companies, consulting groups) and research methodology. These discursive tactics builds a conglomerate framework leading to *factualized* portrayals of learning loss. Importantly, these discursive trends persisted even though the initial research on learning loss was largely speculative, driven on projections or estimates of loss, rather than *actual* representations of learning loss. Further, the notion of student learning was consistently reduced to math and reading test scores. Within this framework, student learning cannot be revealed outside of the context of test scores, serving to further valorize data through a hyper-focus on academics. The limitations of these learning loss projections are important to acknowledge, both on a scientific level and due to the over-generalized portrayals. Scholars have been writing for decades about validity and reliability concerns over standardized testing, yet these perspectives of resistance to the neoliberal narrative were omitted across articles (Au, 2010; Garrison, 2015; Sacks, 1999; Ravitch, 2016). Meanwhile, the pandemic crisis narrative fueled discourse.

The COVID-19 pandemic was used as a catalyst to promote fear, conveying quotes and discourse in a way that factualized learning loss. Article 28 emphasized this tactic:

> A ***personal reckoning*** is playing out in ***hundreds of thousands of homes*** across the nation's second largest school district, where families find themselves in a ***mind-twisting situation.***

While it is important to note the ramifications of a global pandemic, the sensationalism conveys a vague and bleak reality, useful to stimulate belief in a plausible scenario such as the learning loss. Further, it's unclear what exactly is the personal reckoning, nor is it clear what the mind-twisting situation actually entails. As the reader is inhibited by fear, the narratives of learning loss are solidified. In other words, the pandemic crisis offers a catalyst to education reform.

Fear was a prominent theme used to promote the discourse of learning loss. At times, articles offered brief counter-narratives to the pervasive themes of fear and loss, however rhetorical tactics were used to dismiss positive depictions and reinforce learning loss.

> Yes, there are undoubtedly some good things happening with kids at home. ***But it's unlikely they outweigh*** the ***serious***, social, emotional and academic impacts of the virus and school closings [Article 32].

The generalized depiction of loss is depicted as an obvious scenario that all youth are experiencing. In other words, any "good things happening at home" including student learning, growth, and patterns of resiliency are overshadowed by pandemic fear and disaster narratives of the learning loss.

Neoliberal Narrative

The generalized and racialized constructions of youth identities combined with *factualized* portrayals of loss and intertwine to convey a dominant and undergirding theme of neoliberalism. In this section, neoliberalism is used to encapsulate discourse that lends itself to educational reform, privatization, and persistence in standardized testing. Appendix C Table 4C reveals an array of neoliberal narratives that rely on data-based understanding, privilege testing, assessments, consulting companies, and solidify a need for more data. The overreliance on data, often delivered in a de-contextualized and ahistorical manner may implicitly promote privatized education reform and simultaneously justify an over-reliance on data. Meanwhile, educational assessment companies were crucial in driving the overall narratives of learning loss.

> ***Another*** *national study* of ***more than one million students*** from Curriculum Associates, *an assessment company*, found that this winter, there were reductions ***of up to*** 16 percent in the number of elementary students performing at grade level in math, and ***up to*** 10 percent in the number of students performing at grade level in reading [Article 12].

In the article segment above, several points are useful to observe. First, and as noted previously, large sample size, national represented population helps to engender trust with the reader, although the specifics of the sample are not disclosed. Second, the projections in the text emphasize only the high end of their estimations. This tactic clearly aligns with the sensational nature of learning loss that has been a re-occurring theme throughout the analysis. Finally, the reliance on data from the very companies with a major stock in promoting their assessments over the long-term is noteworthy. In other words, the ability of Curriculum Associates to convey disparate outcomes of learning loss both privileges their company and justifies the need for continued assessments. Article 29 continued with the valorization of data:

> I'd like to be ***another voice*** *who really loves looking at data*, and I think if **we** can bring ***that culture*** into the district and make good use of assessment data that we can be stronger for it.

The quote from Article 29 portrays the notion that everyone privileges data, stating "I'd like to be another voice who really loves looking at data". Meanwhile, the attempts to bring "that culture" into the district underscores the pervasive data-based interests needed to making schools stronger. Importantly, it is unclear how the data actually improves outcomes for students – this link is often absent from discourse about assessment data and driven through an assumption of benefits the ensue from assessment data. Further, it's important to note that merely emphasizing data-based decisions is not inherently equitable. In other words, equity-based approaches to data analysis are vital to understanding and upending inequities in student outcomes (Andrews et al., 2019; Tate IV,

2005). One key strategy to promote equity in data-based decisions in schools is through the inclusion of community, family, and youth voices (Andrews et al., 2019). This inclusionary approach would have been extremely valuable to informing and understanding the scope of learning loss research from multiple angles, yet this approach was not emphasized.

To build discursive weight, articles often utilized a neoliberal tactic – the crisis narrative (Biebricher, 2019). In this case, the pandemic and learning loss were portrayed as an intersecting crisis to justify a need for privatized reform, meanwhile these discursive tactics were strengthened by an overwhelming reliance on deficit-based ideology and generalized fear. In addition, the discursive trends of learning loss contributed to the slandering of public school systems by framing them as incapable of educating. Article 34 poses concern regarding the quality of public schools while validating the learning loss narrative: "The exodus of wealthier families could ***further weaken*** public schools at a critical moment: *while confronting student learning loss."* In this quote, "while confronting learning loss" conveys a factualized representation of learning loss, meanwhile the phrase, "further weaken public schools" frames a pre-existing state of public school disarray. This article is largely about the weakening of the public school system, achieved through a rare quote from a parent, stating "I've lost a lot of faith in the district". While the connections to the charter school movement and educational privatization are not explicitly stated, it is important to acknowledge that any *weakening* of the public school system may benefit the charter school movement (Giroux, 2022). The weakening of public schools can be co-opted by neoliberal interests and re-capitulated amid narratives of "failure" – leading to reform, privatization, and strengthening of the charters (see Ball, 2012; Lipman, 2013; Saltman, 2015). Finally, the slanderous portrayals of public schools has been a consistent neoliberal narrative used to propel the charter movement (Garrison, 2018).

As noted above in the factualized learning loss section, "experts" are used to offer a key voice in the dominant narrative, used to engendered trust and stimulate meaning-making (van Dijk, 2008). Article 7 provides an example:

> Can we actually measure how much academic ground students have lost during the pandemic? Should we even try? *To many* education ***experts***, the answer is an ***emphatic*** *yes*. ***Only with*** *this information*, they say, will states and districts feel the necessary urgency to address gaps, by spending resources on interventions like tutoring.

Conveying trust to the reader can often be achieved through rhetorical tactics. Research shows that posing questions may stimulate learning and enhance engagement with the text (Brookfield, 2011). In this instance, a series of questions are posed, with the answer being an, "emphatic yes" reinforced by "expert" knowledge. Specifically, learning loss is *factualized*, then data is proposed as the only option to engender support and reform for students.

Articles pulled from a range of experts to convey trust and factualize learning loss. For example, political experts were voiced in combination with the symbolic references of learning loss written directly into federal legislation. Article 38 states:

> Advancing one of President Biden's main policy agendas, the relief package focuses on getting students back into classrooms and ***making up for*** learning loss. Districts have until late 2024 to spend the money, which they should receive within a few months. ***Experts said*** *the long timeline is an acknowledgment of* ***how much*** *investment students may need to recover* from this past academic year.

In this instance, learning loss is factualized while legislative experts and law reinforce the layers of rhetoric. Meanwhile, the longitudinal impact of learning loss is postulated, serving to justify ongoing testing through sensationalized portrayals – outside the context of relevant research.

Articles utilized legislative trends to uphold dominant themes of learning deficits, privileging a need of longitudinal educational reform [Articles 2; 7; 19; 22; 31; 32; 33; 34; 37 & 38]. Although rare, articles did allude to positive trends in learning, yet quickly moved to dismiss these observation and reinforce dominant trends of loss. Article 29 provides an example:

> At least one large study found no decline in fall reading performance, and only modest losses in math. But testing ***experts*** *caution* that the ***true impact*** of the pandemic on learning could be ***greater than is currently visible***.

The rhetorical approach here is a trifecta of reinforcement that includes citing experts, posing statistical underestimation, and justifying a need for more data. This a consistent pattern in the neoliberal narrative that pre-dates the pandemic learning loss discourse. That is, data is strategically positioned as a pathway to equity promotion in schools, yet more data is always valued, even in the face of widening academic achievement gaps (Au, 2010; Ravitch, 2016; Slater & Seawright, 2019). Collectively, the neoliberal narrative is further justified and reinforced by the construction of youth identities and *factualized* portrayals of loss. The conglomerate of these overlapping thematic elements is known in discourse analysis as intertextuality – referring to the intertwined and layered dimensions of textual representations that build an overall discursive weight (Dunn & Neumann, 2016).

Collectively, the intertextual representation, as noted in fragmented influence in Appendix C Tables C1-C4 and the aforementioned textual analysis reveals a pervasive and intertwined system of fear, hyper-focus on youth deficits, vague and racialized portrayals, factualized depictions of learning loss, and valorized data – posing a longitudinal need for ongoing assessment and measurement. In the following sections, the implications are noted.

Discussion

In this article, critical discourse analysis was used to deconstruct newspaper coverage of the COVID-19 learning loss. The results revealed a substantial amount of cynical and racialized constructions of youth that perpetuate stereotypical notions of student learning, and validate the inequitable and oppressive depiction of an academic achievement gap. Meanwhile, the generalized portrayals of learning deficiencies were often presented in a *factualized* manner, serving to justify the neoliberal narrative, valorize data-based assessments, and underscoring a need for privatized educational reform. This analysis reveals a contemporary form of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007; Giroux, 2009; Saltman, 2015). That is, the pandemic crisis was used to advance neoliberal interests in education reform and privatization – a strategy consistently used throughout the world (see Saltman, 2015).

The intertextual representation of discourse often blamed students for their learning setbacks, while privileging testing and assessments as a reform mechanism to better understand and support students. Meanwhile, minimal attention was paid toward structurally or contextual factors of relevance. That is, systemic inequities (e.g., oppression, racism, socioeconomic) were widespread in society and schools prior to the pandemic – factors that should be the focal point of

current reform efforts. Instead, a hyper-focus on youth deficits conveys a need to "fix" their proposed failings – often constructed through the lens of neoliberal interests (Giroux, 2009; Valencia, 2010). Youth are not a problem in need of correction, nor is testing a viable solution to upending the systemic inequities in schools (Au, 2010). Ultimately, the crisis narrative (i.e., pandemic learning loss) works to supplant a systemic awareness by promulgating fear through a sensationalized focus on the failings of youth.

Describing student learning loss outside of the context of educational inequities is problematic for several reasons. First, scholars have noted that standardized tests often reproduce pre-existing inequities rather than alleviating them (Au, 2010; Ravitch, 2016; Sacks, 1999; Zhao, 2017; Zhao, 2021a). Second, depictions of learning loss are not relevant outside of the context of enduring educational inequities. Decades of research has framed academic and behavioral inequities, yet achievement gaps have widened as privatization and corporate educational trends have increased in schools (Howard, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Saltman, 2015). Students needed support prior to the pandemic (e.g., social, behavioral, academic, mental health, and well-being), yet the reform mechanisms proposed to address learning loss are largely disconnected from the needs of students and driven through a one-size-fits all model of merit-based reform (Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Zhao, 2021a). Instead of supporting the mental health needs of students, the pervasive labels of learning loss may further stigmatize children and youth.

In addition to the de-contextualized and ahistorical trends in newspaper coverage, *factualized* depictions of learning loss were instrumental to perpetuating the neoliberal narrative. Articles revealed deeply embedded themes of neoliberalism delivered through a crisis narrative and often positioned as discursive weapons aimed at educational privatization (Bierbricher, 2019). Themes of neoliberalism were instrumental in manufacturing a need for corporate interests in educational reform through two strategic steps. First, a problem is identified – COVID-19 learning loss – then discourse is portrayed as fact, and the crisis narrative is used to promote a need for reform. Second, the solution being privileged is of privatized reform, in this instance, high-quality tutoring, and enhanced mechanisms of testing and assessment. Lack of skills and learning deficits (i.e., academic achievement gap) have long been a trope in the neoliberal tool bag, paving the way for increases in educational privatization (Au, 2010; Garrison, 2018; Slater & Seawright, 2018). Meanwhile, it's important to note the ties of learning loss discourse to education consulting groups – entities with huge stakes in promoting *loss* (e.g., summer learning loss) to justify reform through services they offer, including standardized testing and high-quality interventions (Dorn et al., 2020a-b; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Kuhfeld, 2019; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020a-d; World Bank, 2020).

A common discursive tactic utilized to recapitulate dominant narratives and engender trust is citing experts (van Dijk, 2008). This tactic was noticed on a large scale in the articles analyzed. As the overreliance on experts and the valorization of data ensued, counter-narratives – such as learning gains or student and family voices were de-emphasized. Only one article provided a counter-narrative to the dominant learning loss ideology, with a quote from a teacher stating: "learning-loss research was being used to "prop up the multibillion-dollar industry of standardized testing [Article 8]. Meanwhile, articles downplayed discussions of student growth, including potential gains in student learning and creativity that may have occurred outside of schools (Mitchell & Greer, 2022). This discursive absence of student resilience strategically benefits the neoliberal interests in education reform, including privatized mechanisms, corporate agenda, education consulting groups, and an enhanced reliance on standardized testing. These discursive

tactics led to a one-sided story of learning deficits, ultimately neglecting stories of student resilience during the pandemic, including the widespread learning and skill development that was occurring outside of schools (Zhao, 2021a).

Implications

The implications of the COVID-19 learning loss discourse and ongoing media coverage may affect students and the future of school systems in several ways. First, articles illuminated the neoliberal agenda undergirding education, as well as the corporate control of media outlets (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). As scholars work toward paradigm shifting efforts that circumvent deficit-based portrayals of students, it is of paramount importance to understand how the media creates and shapes discourse, ultimately impacting societal perspectives and school functionality (Jen et al., 2021a; Jen et al., 2021b; Mitchell & Greer, 2022). Further, the relationship between academic inequality and privatized mechanisms needs to be further investigated in order to uproot oppressive practices and bolster student support.

Second, the deficit-based and stigmatizing labels of learning loss undermines student development and may enhance educator biases (Mitchell & Greer, 2022). Within the context of enduring educational inequities, systemic oppression and racism, a bulk of literature has situated the ongoing role of biases that shape and perpetuate adversarial student outcomes (Allen, 2017; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Morris, 2016; Neal-Jackson, 2020). Given the prevalence of biases circulating through schools prior to the pandemic, the learning loss may add bias to an already extreme system of labeling, stigma, and educational inequities.

Finally, the reform implications of the learning loss discourse may take years to unravel and fully comprehend. If federal and state funding in the U.S. gets dispersed to reform mechanisms such as standardized testing and assessment, this may siphon important funds from equity promoting efforts, social and emotional support, school mental health service delivery, and other ventures imperative for strengthening inclusive student services.

Recommendations

To counter the deficit-based constructions of youth and the neoliberal agenda, several recommendations are offered.

First, it appears that standardized testing and assessments will be a prominent mechanism utilized in schools to “address” learning loss. In light of this, it is recommended to move to more inclusive forms of student portrayals that seek to understand youth and circumvent stigmatizing and deficit-based constructions of youth. For example, James and colleagues (2021) re-define student resilience through inclusion, youth assets, and universal support in a way that garners their input and informs practice and pedagogy. Additionally, students had a significant opportunity to learn informally throughout the pandemic, skills which may include, but are not limited to, digital technology skills, online learning techniques, home-life management skills, new socializing strategies, video game learning techniques, music creation, health literacy and promotion, and social justice advocacy (Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Mizikaci & Ata, 2022). The opportunity to develop some of these skills may disproportionately privilege affluent families and youth, learning loss discourse often fails to examine the experiences of learning for youth outside of schools or in an online realm (Literat, 2021). Acknowledging the setbacks caused by the pandemic may be useful to stimulate political incentives and relief support, however the sensationalized focus on

youth deficits may be harmful to youth over the long-term (Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Zhao, 2021a). Moving forward, adopting a paradigm that searches to detect student assets, strengths, and factors of resiliency and intelligence that exist outside of a standardized tests can help to re-align awareness and build inclusion (Gardner, 2011). Further, this recommendation would bolster the voices of students, giving them an opportunity to be heard rather than labeled from a deficit-based perspective (Bell, 2010; Hodges, 2019). This paradigm shifting work can help move schools into more inclusive, holistic, and anti-oppressive environments where students feel supported, loved, and understood amidst their realities, strengths, and unique skill sets (Zhao, 2021b).

Second, the analysis revealed minimal student and family representation in these articles. When students and families were quoted it was often a discursive tactic to bolster the pre-existing narrative of the article (i.e., weakening depictions of public schools; Article 34]. Moving forward, it is recommended that students and families are included in discussions and reform interventions (Radina & Schwartz, 2019). For example, how does the learning loss discourse resonate or deviate from student perspectives? As new stigmatizing labels are created and cast out, students may be impacted in unique and varied ways based upon their identities and the subsequent treatment from school staff and educators (Annamma et al., 2019). To increase holistic support for students, we must strive to respect students by including their voices, perspectives, and diversity in ideologies into every aspect of the educational experience.

Third, to continue the trends in strengthening support for students, it is recommended to move beyond the deficit-based trends that often alienate students and confound educational challenges (Love & Beneke, 2021). Less recognizable patterns of deficit-based trends in schools are prevalent in an array of "at-risk" labeling systems that utilize pathologizing metrics associated with testing and assessments, including the academic achievement gap, school readiness, student classifications (e.g., English language learners and special education), and intervention models (Au, 2010; Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love & Beneke, 2021; Gee, 2017; Iorio & Parnell, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2019; Umansky & Dumont, 2021; Zhao, 2021a). Collectively, these efforts put the onus on students for their perceived lack of school readiness, or lower academic achievement, rather than framing inequity in the context of systemic or socioeconomic factors (Iorio & Parnell, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Fourth, the ongoing trends in educational privatization and school allegiance to education consulting groups detract key funds away from important inclusive practices and support (Baltodano, 2012; Au & Ferrare, 2015; Sondel et al., 2015). These trends promote standardized testing and assessments which have wide-ranging deleterious effects on students, teachers, and educators, while simultaneously overshadowing the need for equitable reform efforts (Au, 2010; Ravitch, 2016; Sacks, 1999). It is recommended to re-evaluate the needs of schools, educators, students, and families, in lieu of corporate interests. Specifically, do education consulting groups offer the pathway to equity or would reform dollars be more aptly spent on, for instance, school mental health professionals, social and emotional learning, or restorative justice interventions? Substantial strategies toward equity exist outside of corporate allegiance and privatized mechanisms, however shifting the paradigm depends upon prioritizing them.

Finally, future research should continue exploring the neoliberal trends in educational research. With respect to the learning loss discourse, what actors, organizations, think-tanks, corporations, and non-profits are involved in mobilizing and sustaining the neoliberal network of influence on educating institutions. Future research may consider the utility of social network

analysis to document the network of influences, ideologies, and key players that support the learning loss discourse (see Ball, 2012).

Limitations

This study should be understood in the context of several limitations. First, due to the study aims, the sample of collected articles all entailed the phrase "learning loss" and may have been subject to sampling bias leading to a potential exclusion of articles with positive sentiment. While this is a noted limitation, the intent here was to explore the media's role in shaping themes of learning loss. Second, critical discourse analysis is driven through an iterative analytical process, and as such, may be influenced by researcher bias. To limit this potential bias, direct quotes and newspaper articles analyzed were provided. This potential bias is acknowledged (i.e., research subjectivity), meanwhile other researchers are encouraged to further this investigation. An additional limitation is with respect to the article inclusion criteria. Specifically, 173 articles were excluded due to lack of substantive content and geographic location, however all of these excluded articles included passing references to the COVID-19 learning loss. Further, the learning loss was a global phenomenon, meanwhile this sample only analyzed U.S. based newspaper articles. In consideration of the media's impact on conveying a factualized portrayal of learning loss, the excluded articles (i.e., referencing learning loss in passing, international news sources) may also have contributed to the dominant themes of learning loss discourse. Therefore, findings may have been underestimated given the predominance of excluded articles. A final limitation is with respect to the analytical framing of learning loss as a "deficit-based ideology". Learning loss has been iteratively articulated as deficit-based due to the pre-existing educational inequities, the over-generalized depictions of loss, lack of data disaggregation, the minimized focus on youth variations in pandemic learning, and the discursive trends focused on youth deficiencies. Furthermore, newspaper article renderings of learning loss construct youth as learning deficient, positioning them *in need* of reform, and circumvent the school's educating responsibilities. All findings should be interpreted within the context of these limitations.

Conclusion

As the media continues its allegiance to neoliberal corporate interests, the future of school functionality hangs in the balance. Mechanisms of privatization are flourishing, including education consulting groups and their efforts to enhance school reliance on student testing and assessment. As many of us work to upend educational inequities and the paradigm shifts toward supporting students, families, and communities more holistically, we must simultaneously work to understand the media's impact on societal structure, and school mechanisms that may reproduce inequities. Deficit-based frameworks of failure – emblematic in the COVID-19 learning loss – perpetuate labels and do little to offer the inclusive support that students sorely need. Inclusive frameworks that search to detect strengths, promote resilience, uncover unique skill development, and support students holistically on a one to one level are the pathways of equity promotion. Students are the future and it is through this recognition that their voices must be included, understood, and amplified throughout the educational experience.

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Appendix A

Newspaper Articles Analyzed

Title	Authors	Newspaper	Date	ID
Board plans for summer schools	Curtis Winston	Chicago Daily Herald	4/16/21	1
Newsome budget aims to revive schools: Plan underscores the governor's desire to reopen campuses for K-12 students quickly.	Howard Blume, Teresa Walanabe, & Nine Agrawal	Los Angeles Times	1/9/21	2
Saving school year in L.A. hinges on vaccinating teachers; Race is on to get educators shots and reopen campuses	Howard Blume, Paloma Esquivel	Los Angeles Times	1/26/21	3
How district 87 is thinking differently about summer school this year	N/A	Chicago Daily Herald	4/18/21	4
How suburban schools are addressing the pandemic's impact on learning*	Madhu Krishnamurthy	Chicago Daily Herald	3/29/21	5
New Jersey Students Log in From all over the world	Tracey Tulley	The New York Times	4/9/21	6
Pritzker urges schools to focus COVID relief funds	Peter Hancock	Chicago Daily Herald	4/6/21	7
Johnson Camp: Johnson Pause Slows College Vaccinations; Education Briefing	Amelia Nierenberg & Kate Taylor	The New York Times	4/14/21	8
The pandemic's impact on learning*	Madhu Krishnamurthy	Chicago Daily Herald	3/29/21	9
U-46 summer programs won't be purely academic	Madhu Krishnamurthy	Chicago Daily Herald	4/15/21	10
Coronavirus in California; LAUSD to weigh adding two weeks to school year; Supt. Beutner says the plan would address learning loss, trauma from campus closures	Howard Blume & Laura Newberry	Los Angeles Times	4/13/21	11
Does it Hurt Children to Measure Pandemic Learning Loss?*	Dana Goldstein	The New York Times	4/8/21	12
Help wanted again at LAUSD	N/A	Los Angeles Times	4/22/21	13
Do you think you have experienced 'Learning Loss' During the Pandemic?	Katherine Schulten	The New York Times	4/13/21	14
Teachers and Parents Worry About Measuring Pandemic Learning Loss*	Dana Goldstein	The New York Times	4/10/21	15
U-46 rolls out new, not fully academic summer programs*	Madhu Krishnamurthy	Chicago Daily Herald	4/15/21	16
Barrington 220 Board of Education 2021 Election: Mental Health Questionnaire	N/A	Chicago Daily Herald	4/2/21	17

Clearing Hurdles to Fast Internet for All	Cecilia Kang	The New York Times	4/2/21	18
Local schools getting a funding boost from COVID-19 grants	Dave Oberhelman	Chicago Daily Herald	4/8/21	19
Murphy: Local schools set to receive over $177 million in federal funding	Laura Murphy	Chicago Daily Herald	4/2/21	20
Even the bad things taught me good things:' Teachers, students, parents reflect on a the year COVID-19 closed schools	Marni Pyke	Chicago Daily Herald	3/12/21	21
Deal reached Schools could reopen in April: Agreement between	Howard Blume	Los Angeles Times	3/10/21	22
Administration stepping up to the push to Reopen Schools	Katie Rogers & Erica L. Green	The New York Times	3/4/21	23
Coronavirus in California; Parents aren't convinced that L.A. schools are safe; After a year of warnings, many are wary of in-person education*	Howard Blume	Los Angeles Times	3/30/21	24
Cold interrupts Classes, in an Interrupted Year; Education Briefing	Amelia Nierenberg & Kate Taylor	The New York Times	2/17/21	25
Pandemic silenced voices, but school finds way to be heard	N/A	Chicago Daily Herald	4/4/21	26
Past controversies reverberate in District 59 school board race	Christopher Placek	Chicago Daily Herald	4/2/21	27
Why students are logging in to class from 7,000 miles away	Tracey Tulley	The New York Times	4/8/21	28
Coronavirus in California; ‘Alarming picture’ at LAUSD’ Among pandemic’s hardest hit were those already struggling, report finds.	Howard Blume	Los Angeles Times	4/1/21	29
Elgin council backs continued partnership with education group	Rick West	Chicago Daily Herald	3/30/21	30
State releases guide to reopening schools	Peter Hancock	Chicago Daily Herald	4/1/21	31
That Spotty WiFi? There’s $100 Billion to Fix it.	Cecilia Kang	The New York Times	4/1/21	32
The post-pandemic educational mess ahead; The consequences of school shutdowns were underestimated -- but they're very serious.	Morgan Polikoff	Los Angeles Times	4/1/21	33
Suburban parents push public schools in New Jersey to Reopen Faster*	Tracey Tulley	The New York Times	3/24/21	34
A call to drop standardized tests this spring Drop; Dist. 300 superintendent says schools would have to shut down for 2 ½ weeks for testing	Madhu Krishnamurthy	Chicago Daily Herald	3/1/21	35
School leaders statewide say no to standardized tests this spring	Madhu Krishnamurthy	Chicago Daily Herald	3/1/21	36

Schumer Secures Billions in Aid for Private Schools	Erica Green	The New York Times	3/14/21	37
How can Schools Use $129 Billion in Covid Relief Funds?	Amelia Nierenberg & Kate Taylor	The New York Times	3/24/21	38

Appendix B

The figure below provides an example of the critical discourse process that includes the application of Gee's (2004) seven building tasks (see Figure 1B). In this example, initial coding techniques began the process, detecting codes of *learning loss in math* and *learning loss in reading.* These initial codes were then clustered coded as *types of learning loss.* After these two steps, Gee's seven building tasks were applied to the clustered themes of learning loss. Each of the seven tasks were reviewed, with questions being posed alongside each task. For example, *practices* led to an examination of specific word choices used in the portrayals and depictions of learning loss in math and reading. Next, *relationships* were helpful to assess the actors posing the depictions of loss. That is, who was quoted, were there experts cited. Meanwhile, *connections* was useful to analyze who the depictions of loss were being made about. In other words, what type of students were described with learning loss, and how were they being described discursively. Next, *politics* was useful to illuminate how justifications of learning loss were made, and the identities, actors, organizations, and elites that were privileged across article discourse. *Significance* helped to explore how often representations of learning loss were being portrayed in a certain way, to document any recursive patterns. Finally*, signs, systems, and knowledge* helped to assess the framing of discourse (e.g., deficit-based), and the contextual aspects of relevance as juxtaposed and informed by the theoretical framework and sensitizing concepts. All of these steps are supported by the theoretical framework (i.e., critical race theory, deficit-based ideology) to help contextualize and clarify the full scope of discursive representations.

After Gee's seven building tasks were applied, the results of developing questions and context informed the development of structured questions to be used during stage two of the analytical coding process. Structured questions were then used to guide an entire second stage of the coding process, again supported by theoretical framework and sensitizing concepts. Finally, interpretative findings were also supported by the product of structured questions, two stages of analysis, and supportive theoretical frameworks and constructs.

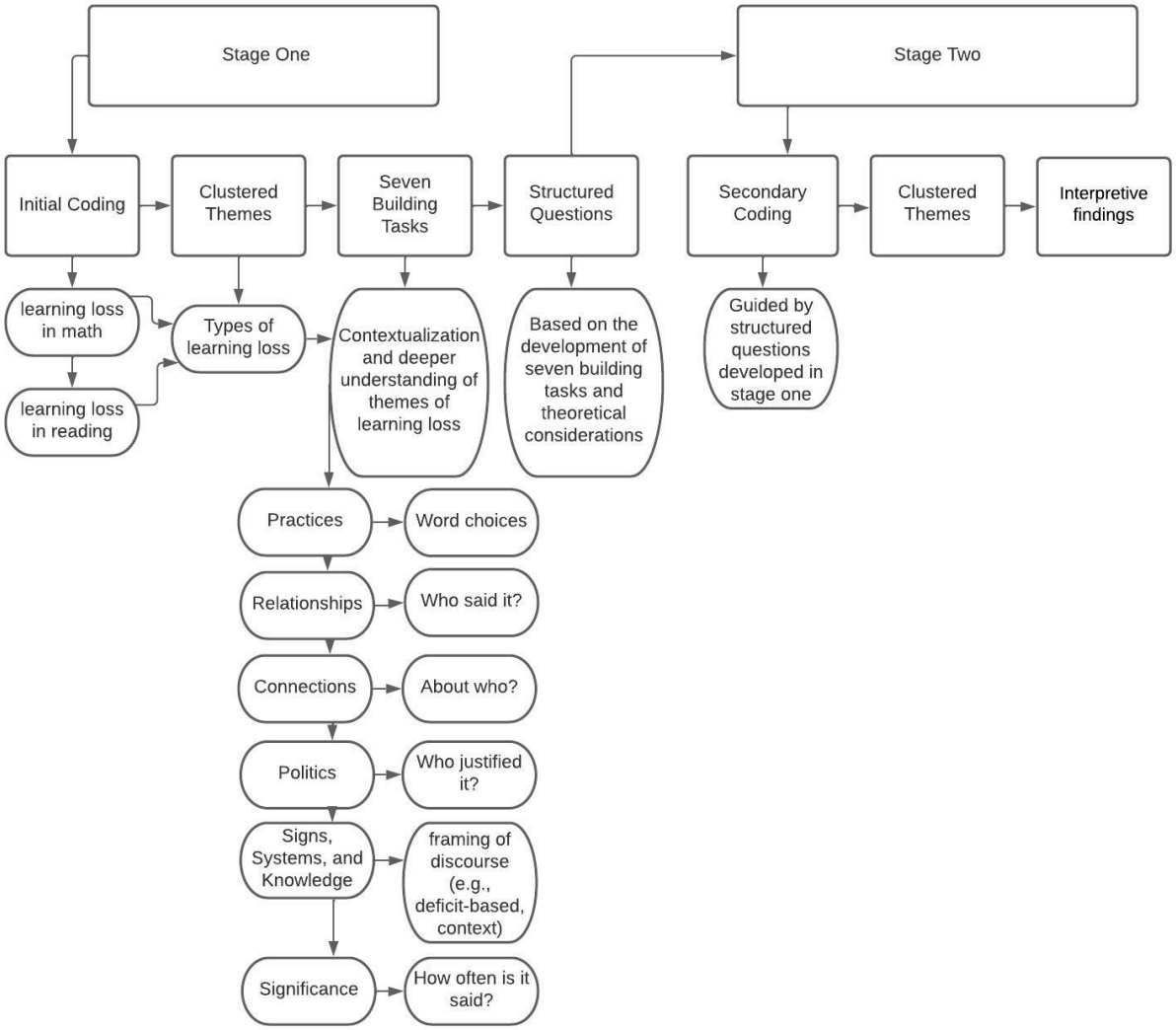

Figure 1B. A Flowchart Example of the Critical Discourse Analysis Process

Appendix C

Table 1C

Constructions of Youth Identities
Generation at risk (17)
Failing grades (38)
We can't reward those who didn't do anything (1)
Most at risk (12)
Students impacted most severely (4)
Students are struggling (35; 36)
Likely to see disproportionate impact (2; 5)
Disproportionate impact: students with disabilities, low income (7)
Youngest worst affected (31)

Simmering mental health crisis (15)
Student upheaval (38)
Educational minefield (17)
Many have missed out (14)
Learning deficits (14)
Unmet need and desperation (37)
The research also indicated that some higher-income students had learning gains (3)

Table 2C

Racialized Constructions of Youth Identities
Latinx struggling to keep up (1; 5; 9)
Disproportionate impact (2; 6; 7; 9)
Learning loss, especially on behalf of the Black, Hispanic, and low-income children (12)
These dips are larger in schools with more Black, Latino, and low-income students (33)
Black, Native American, Latinx hardest hit (18; 32)
[learning loss] Particularly in poor and minority communities already plagued by achievement gaps (28)
Disproportionate experience of learning loss (23)
Black and Latino fell furthest behind (29)
Gaps exacerbated (5)

Table 3C

Factualized Portrayals of Learning Loss
Confronting learning loss (34)
Compounded loss (28)
…tries to pull many of its students out of a year of learning loss (13)
to address learning loss (2; 11)
Children have missed out on mastering fundamental reading and math skills (12)
In an effort to make up for pandemic learning loss (16)
Parents can't handle this inconsistency (28)
Making up for learning loss (38)
Amid learning loss (27)
Struggling with learning loss (35)
Studies continue to show (13)
Experts say (8; 13; 28; 34 38)
Students continuing to struggle (5)
Experts caution that the true impact of the pandemic on learning could be greater than is currently visible (1)
But a long timeline, other educational experts said, is essential to addressing the upheavals (38)
Students at all levels have suffered academically (29)

Table 4C
Neoliberal Narratives of Learning Loss

Plagued by achievement gaps (6; 13; 28)
Long-term impact (38)
Going to take years to recover (5)
Identifying where the gaps are; identify where learning loss is (35)
It's going to take multiple years to make sure a generation doesn't miss out (5)
Need to mitigate the effects of learning loss long term (2)
Exodus of wealthier families could further weaken public schools (34)
Interim assessments to measure the impact the pandemic has had on student learning (31)
Efforts to close the gap in learning (1)
To assess learning losses… data must guide their work (27)
We need accurate, ongoing measurement (33)
The Biden administration has told most states that unlike in 2020, they should plan on testing students this year (13)

Author

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