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Illusions of opportunity? A critical discourse analysis of Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative

Alexander Camardelle

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, ILLUSIONS OF OPPORTUNITY? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ATLANTA'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH INITIATIVE, by Alexander K. Camardelle, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

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ILLUSIONS OF OPPORTUNITY? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ATLANTA'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH INITIATIVE

by

ALEXANDER K. CAMARDELLE

Under the Direction of Kristen L. Buras

ABSTRACT

This is a critical discourse analysis of discourses that are present within an opportunity youth initiative in Atlanta, Georgia that disproportionately serves Black youth. Historically, job training policies and the stakeholders who influence the formation and implementation of programs and services do so in the context of neoliberalism, which fails to direct explicit attention to systemic barriers that Black youth face when navigating education and employment. To that end, there are concerns that the race-neutral orientation of job training policies and programs, their associated discourses, and the actors that deploy those discourses may negatively construct Black youth and advance neoliberal ideology. To address these concerns, this study asks the following question: *How are youth constructed by discourses in the opportunity youth initiative?*

Policy documents and media associated with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative were analyzed using critical discourse analysis methods to understand the linkage between power, policy and discourse. Critical policy

studies and critiques of neoliberal ideology informed the analysis. The findings suggest that although the opportunity youth initiative is framed as a positive intervention, actors in the discursive web utilize the mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality to uphold negative “truths” about Black youth. Flaws in the discourse are examined. This study lays groundwork for a new critical framework that rejects negative social constructions of Black youth and invites a critical pedagogy of racial capitalism.

INDEX WORDS: critical discourse analysis, discourse, youth, workforce development, opportunity youth, racism, labor markets, governmentality, neoliberalism

ILLUSIONS OF OPPORTUNITY? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ATLANTA'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH INITIATIVE

by

Alexander K. Camardelle

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the young, gifted, and Black souls who are told their dreams are too big, that college is not for them, or that they are too focused on their creative gifts, whatever they may be. You are much more than the economic value placed on you by this society. Most importantly, this labor of love is dedicated to my younger brother William, who inspires my commitment to disrupting unjust systems through policy change.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over 120 years ago, two of the most renowned leaders in Black political history stood in Georgia divided on the path forward for economic prosperity during the post-slavery reconstruction era. Booker T. Washington, born into enslavement, stood before leaders during the 1895 Atlanta Exposition and claimed that "our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands" (Washington, 1895, p. 32). Washington's Black intellectual counterpart during reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois, would come to lament Washington's remarks. As the originator of the "talented tenth" concept, Du Bois argued that Washington's strategy is reminiscent of an "old attitude of adjustment and submission," that reinforces white oppression (Du Bois, 1903). Du Bois argued that political agitation is a core strategy to achieve civil rights and economic liberation in the United States, with political action essential for economic advancement (Wintz, 2015). However, Du Bois would later publish research that framed Black youth as delinquent subjects, and suggested that youth labor is a possible solution to reducing crime in Black communities, particularly those in inner cities (Du Bois, 1904).

These two formidable leaders would cast a long shadow on the creation of education and training policies that seek to improve the economic conditions of Black youth in the United States. Specifically, their combined perspectives on youth labor extend well-into twenty-first century policy discourses. For instance, contemporary policies and initiatives like summer jobs programs are premised on the possibility that youth employment is key to reducing youth crime and poverty, and hard work through industrial labor creates a pathway to economic prosperity (Schwartz, Leos-Urbel, McMurry, & Wiswall, 2015; Lardier, Herr, Bergeson, Garcia-Reid, & Reid, 2020; Davis & Heller, 2020). Furthermore, policies and programs that seek to address

youth problems have a history of using tactics of pathology that extend the views of Washington, Du Bois and many others into the current-day climate of neoliberalism that erode opportunities for hegemonic resistance among poor Black youth (Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2016). For example, Lardier et al. (2020) argue that while youth of color participating in out-of-school programs in urban, neoliberal contexts "are often seen as dangerous and in need of controlling, their real threat to societal arrangements is their critical read of the slice of the world they inhabit and the possible exercise of agency toward social change" (p. 412). To that end, research is needed to help policymakers, practitioners and advocates understand how discourses create or limit anti-racist resistance to neoliberalism in job training policies and programs. Unfortunately, the field of study for *opportunity youth,* who are the current subject of job training policies and initiatives in the United States, lacks discourse analyses as they relate to the role that hegemonic discourses play in the racialized lives of Black youth who are out of school and unemployed.

Opportunity youth is the latest term that replaces other terms to describe marginalized youth in society, such as delinquent, juvenile, at risk, super predator or disconnected youth (Kamenetz, 2015; Matthew & Ferber, 2016). Opportunity youth was first introduced into the popular discourse on youth and workforce development by John Bridgeland in 2012 as a "less-pejorative" way to refer to young people who were considered "idle in society," since they "represent enormous untapped potential for our society" (p. 12). Bridgeland wrote a widely referenced report on school dropout issues funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that explained the consequences of failing to address a growing number of youth who have disengaged from work and from school. In the report, Bridgeland (2012) described opportunity youth in the following way:

> These disconnected youth, whom we call "opportunity youth" – both because they are seeking opportunity and they present an opportunity to our nation if we invest in them – fail to get the education and work skills they need to reach their full potential. (p. 5)

Bridgeland's use of opportunity youth also had a second meaning. In a written interview with a National Public Radio journalist Anya Kamenetz (2015), Bridgeland claimed that the term also speaks to the social costs of young people who are out-of-school and unemployed, as measured in lost wages and expenditures on welfare. In the interview, he stated that opportunity youth "cost the economy and our society $93 billion every year… If you're not compelled by the moral, individual argument, maybe the economic argument will wake you up" (para. 27).

Opportunity youth are given priority for job training services under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Established by Congress in 2014, WIOA supersedes previous federal job training policies like the Workforce Innovation Act of 1998 (WIA) and the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982. The current law specifies rules and provides funding for job training services for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who or are neither in school nor working (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). WIOA established statutory requirements for corporations and education systems at the state and local levels to collaborate and develop solutions to high rates of youth unemployment and non-attendance in schools (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014).

WIOA is not the first policy that mandates that businesses play a larger role in the traditional or nontraditional education of youth and young adults. The public education system is one example where "business and state leaders have become intricately involved in establishing curriculum, pedagogical practices and testing standards" (Lakes & Carter, 2009, p. 140). As young people transition from public schools to job training programs, they are transitioning from

one domain that is increasingly influenced by free-market business interests to another that is almost exclusively, at least by law, dominated by business interests under public-private partnerships (Ayers & Carlone, 2007). While debates between public schooling and neoliberalism are becoming clearer, the role of neoliberalism in job training policies and initiatives is less contested (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Lakes & Carter, 2009; Wainwright, Buckingham, Marandet, & Smith, 2011; Van Oort, 2015).

Under neoliberal systems of governance, public-private partnerships are widely understood to promote economic development and to enable the unemployed to gain work (Ayers & Carlone, 2007). While this view is rarely disputed in local, state and national policy debates, critics do associate neoliberalism with rising inequality, the exploitation of labor and the erosion of public goods (Bourdieu 1998; Aune 2001; Fairclough 2001; Giroux 2004; Harvey 2007; Ayers & Carlone, 2007). Critics also note that while public-private partnerships involve institutions with missions to serve the public good on one hand, they also involve for-profit enterprises that focus on increasing capital, which expands racial inequity and economic distress among people of color (Hall, 2013; Reed, 2013; Reed, 2018). Given these controversies, it is important to understand the processes of neoliberalism as they play out within institutions and the lives of poor young people implicated by these programs and policies, in this case, opportunity youth initiatives.

Researcher Subjectivity

I am uniquely situated to research neoliberal discourses that manifest in Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. Six years ago, I began a career as a philanthropic program officer at a major national foundation that administered private grants to opportunity youth programs, which makes me keenly aware of the ways that organizations leverage public and private funds

to implement training for opportunity youth in Metro Atlanta. In the role, I attended many workgroup and taskforce meetings that sought to align opportunity youth programs with industry sectors (healthcare, hospitality, transportation, logistics) in Georgia as mandated by WIOA (2014). My current profession is public policy analysis, where I specialize in broad workforce development policies at the local, state and federal level. Specifically, I lead research and advocacy initiatives that seek to ensure job training policies are designed with the needs of young people that are traditionally and deliberately excluded from the labor market in mind. For instance, I coordinate a coalition of nonprofit job training providers and grassroots advocacy organizations that lobby state and federal lawmakers for higher wages for workers, eliminating costly barriers to higher education, and direct cash support for the unemployed.

In addition to career experience, my deepest inspiration for wanting to understand the role of discourses within the opportunity youth field and what their implications for Black youth may be is my younger brother. In 2016, my brother relocated from Mississippi to Georgia to live with me after deciding not to complete a traditional high school diploma. While I did not accept his decision initially, I had to reflect on the immense amount of contempt and distrust he developed during his schooling as a young, Black teenager who was repeatedly policed by his mostly-white teachers in public schools in south Mississippi. Since coming to Georgia, I have assisted him on his journey to complete his GED, which has led him to various WIOA-funded programs that are available to opportunity youth. While my brother's experience is not generalizable, it has inspired me to critically analyze the discourses within job training policies and initiatives and what consequences, if any at all, may emerge from those discourses.

Problem Statement

Research that applies a critical discourse analysis of the neoliberal discourses that extend to opportunity youth policies and programs is scarce. Few studies perform discourse analyses to understand the role that neoliberal ideology, language, and power may play in the formation and implementation of opportunity youth policies and initiatives. Many studies on youth employment and training are evaluations that focus almost exclusively on job-related outcomes such as placement and retention. However, programs do not operate in a vacuum or separate from any sociopolitical context. For example, there are policies that mandate certain measures of accountability and curriculum design within opportunity youth initiatives. An assemblage of actors or stakeholders, including chambers of commerce, state and local governments, nonprofits, philanthropies and the media play a role in the creation of those policies and programs. The potential for youth to complete a program and find employment is also dependent on the labor market, and labor markets are volatile, changing over time and reinforce racial, gender and other forms of discrimination that limit economic opportunities (Dickinson and Oaxaca, 2009; Restifo, Roscigno, & Qian, 2013; Schmitz, 2017; Quillian, Pager & Hexel, 2017; Lang & Spitzer, 2020).

Critics also argue that the policies that govern job training schemes are frequently designed in race-neutral ways that do not take into account the specific needs and experiences of Black youth who are disproportionately represented in this 'category' of youth in Atlanta (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2016; Johnson, Bashay, Bergson-Shilcock, Richardson & DeRenzis, 2019; Lam, 2020; Davis, Paris, & McMican, 2020; Lewis, 2020). The term race-neutral was used in this study to describe policies or discourses that did not explicitly mention race or racism, but may be "carried out in ways that allow preexisting racial stereotypes

and race-based disadvantages to produce large cumulative disadvantage" (Schram, 2009, p. 415). According to Pickard (2016), "WIOA is a colorblind or race-neutral policy; that is, although its purpose is to provide opportunities to previously marginalized adults, it seeks to apply solutions without consideration for race or the existence of past or present racial discrimination" (p. 53). Consequently, these policies and programs may be designed without key contextual and critical knowledge about Black youth, the employment and education barriers that they face, and mechanisms to address systemic barriers such as racism in the labor market. However, there are various actors operating in the public-private partnerships mandated by WIOA, therefore it is important to explore if those actors resist or sustain processes of race-neutral neoliberalism within opportunity youth initiatives that disproportionately serve Black youth.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theories of Political Economy

Given the impact of economic interests on educational policy, critical theories of political economy are an appropriate lens for this study. Specifically, I draw on critiques of neoliberalism and racial capitalism to inform the analysis. Pauline Lipman (2013) defines neoliberalism as "an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere" (p. 6). Neoliberalism has played a crucial role in reinforcing race and class disparities in society. Race-neutrality is favored by neoliberals, who often propagate the notion of a post-racial society that prioritizes individualism over a focus on structural barriers. For instance, Gilroy (2013) states:

> The dreams of uplift, security and possibility, the prospect of hope in a better future secured through consistently hard yet always ennobling labor, are gathered into the familiar neoliberal concept of 'aspiration'. The idea that anyone can be helped by

> government to change themselves and thereby to alter their life chances by the sheer, dedicated force of their own will, is now fundamental to the legitimacy of neoliberal reform and the notions of merit that it still seems to need… The story of striving - today's 'aspiration' - seems more plausible and becomes more generally appealing when it is presented as the vindication or redemption of racialized forms of both natural difference and social suffering. Any individual's successful battle to overcome the effects of racism can supply conclusive evidence that racism is no longer something to be concerned about. (pg. 26-27)

The doctrine of individualistic, race-neutral neoliberalism was perhaps best articulated by economist Milton Friedman (1993) who strongly opposed the liberal welfare state of the twentieth century in the United States and argued the following:

> The great virtue of a free market system is that it does not care what color people are; it does not care what their religion is; it only cares whether they can produce something you want to buy. It is the most effective system we have discovered to enable people who hate one another to deal with one another and help one another. (p. 11)

Neoliberals like Friedman and his contemporaries advocate for "extending the doctrine of the free market to embrace every part of public and personal worlds and entails the transformation of states and governments from being providers of social welfare to promoters of markets and competition" (Ahlberg, Hamed, Thapar-Bjorket, & Bradby, 2019, p. 4). The result has meant cuts to public spending on public assistance like cash aid and food stamps, disinvestment in public education and health care, shifting public tax-funded services to for-profit enterprises (such as private prisons), the eroded regulation of private markets and more. This establishes a paradox where the poorest in society have to find solutions for their own education and social

welfare with the extraordinary expectation that nothing will interfere with their individual effort to move out of poverty—not even racism (Davis, 2007; Ahlberg et. al, 2019). Ahlberg et. al (2019) argue that the neoliberal silencing of racism results in a process that actually makes racism even more invisible because it "removes any suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt from personal thought and public discussion while legitimizing the existing social, political, and economic arrangements which privilege whites" (p. 3). Simultaneously, neoliberalism serves as a "political project to reestablish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (Harvey, 2007, p. 19).

Katznelson (2005) describes this point in relation to race-neutral policies such as affirmative action, which is aimed at assisting Black Americans and other people of color to achieve equitable access to public education, careers, and housing. Neoliberal opponents object to affirmative action under the belief that it delivers gains to Black people unfairly and at the expense of White Americans, which violates the neoliberal principle that individuals should be responsible for their own welfare. Friedman (1962) also compared affirmative action and other anti-discrimination policies to Jim Crow laws, writing the following:

> If it is appropriate for the state to say that individuals may not discriminate in employment because of color or race or religion, then it is equally appropriate for the state, provided a majority can be found to vote that way, to say that individuals must discriminate in employment on the basis of color, race or religion. (p. 111)

The individualistic and race-neutral features of neoliberalism also require governmentality, not to be confused as just local, state, and federal public institutions (Ong, 2007; Goldberg, 2009; Dumas, 2016). Governmentality, as described by Foucault (1991), involves the governing of people, their values, ideas, and social processes. As Dumas (2016)

argues, “governmentality refers not only to the technologies of policy implementation, but also, and equally important, the logics that frame policy proposals, policy discourse, and even policy evaluation and assessment” (p. 98). Governmentality invites the state and corporate actors into social life by framing how social issues should be understood (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991). Harvey (2007) writes that “businesses and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors, but even acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)” (pg. 76). Through this process, the state is introduced into social life as an actor responsible for managing social problems with corporate support while avoiding responsibility for creating those problems (Harvey, 2007; Dumas, 2016).

By delegitimizing the idea that government should be responsible for the collective social good and redressing its historical racial atrocities (such as enslavement, legal school segregation, prohibitions on voting, residential red-lining, etc.) neoliberalism advances the notion that individual citizens should take care of themselves. Drawing on Ong (2007) and Goldberg (2009), Dumas (2016) argues that “neoliberalism promises freedom through self-mastery and manages (the problem of) race largely by promising increased freedom and economic opportunities through a market driven by choice and efficiency rather than racial ideology or allegiance” (p. 100).

Understanding how neoliberal discourses advance racism, even though appearing race-neutral, was essential to this study. I chose neoliberalism as the theoretical lens for this study because of the controversies I described earlier related to public-private partnerships in education and training policies and programs created for youth. The combined economic growth imperative of job training programs and race neutrality also makes neoliberalism an appropriate lens for

exploring the discourses operating in the opportunity youth field. This framework also enables resistance. Neoliberalism is pervasive, but not totally hegemonic. Stuart Hall (2011) asserts the following about neoliberalism:

> It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are final. Hegemony has constantly to be 'worked on', maintained, renewed and revised. Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions… and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew. They constitute what Raymond Williams called 'the emergent' – and the reason why history is never closed but maintains an open horizon towards the future. (p. 728)

With Hall's words in mind, this framework enabled the exploration of discourses that either advance or counter hegemony that actors may engage in throughout the opportunity youth initiative.

One important delimitation to note is the framework that I used in this study narrowed my analytical view to discourses that may address race and class. I was specifically concerned with Black youth in this study. By focusing on Black youth, I did not intend to mute or make other youth of color invisible. My purpose for conducting this study follows that of Dumas (2016), who writes that "it is the development of blackness that most heavily informs racial neoliberal logics" (p. 97). I also focused on poor Black youth in this study because "although poor and working-class whites may suffer economic inequities, their subordinate class position is not compounded by race; they possess whiteness as a form of property, which bestows protections and benefits, even if mediated by class position" (Buras, 2014, p. 61). Additionally, Black Americans have historically been the target of policies that exacerbate the racial divide

along economic lines since slavery, and even a (de)racialized welfare-to-work policy in this current, neoliberal political economy is making it difficult to reverse those divisions (Quadagno, 1994). According to Maxwell (2004), "a theory that brightly illuminates one area will leave other areas in darkness; no theory can illuminate everything" (p. 50). I recognize here there may be intersectional elements at play, and the experience of people of color and immigrants in our public workforce system may be mediated by gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities. I am committed to addressing those elements in future work.

Purpose

This study explored the ways that stakeholders translate neoliberal concepts made available to them in an effort to understand how they influence an opportunity youth initiative in Metro Atlanta. Specifically, the purpose is to critically examine the contributions of neoliberal discourses to Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative and understand their implications for Black youth who are neither in school nor working. As discussed previously and in other sections of this study, previous research found that neoliberal features of public-private partnerships, individualism and race neutrality are significant features of workforce training policies and programs. Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative was developed within the neoliberal context, which I describe in greater detail in Chapter 2. This study analyzed those features through critical discourse analysis.

Critics argue that neoliberalism is viewed as an intractable ideology that can be translated into policy in different ways, depending on social contexts (Peck & Tickell, 2000; Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2012; Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013; Reed, 2018). In this view, neoliberalism as an ideology takes on meaning through a process where concepts from different social contexts come into contact with each other and influence political

interpretation and action. This process of meaning-making is referred to as translation (Peck & Tickell (2000), whereby stakeholders within a policy field, such as workforce development, select neoliberal features from ideas available to them within the broader social context and use them discursively to influence policy choices (Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2012; Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013; Reed, 2018). Thus, the purpose of this study was to demonstrate the meaning-making process in the context of race-neutral neoliberalism, youth workforce development and public private partnerships. Lastly, the purpose is to offer a critique of the language practices deployed by stakeholders that permeate policy documents and media and to illuminate possibilities for resistance.

Significance of the Study

Most studies on job training policies and programs do not address the historic and systemic barriers that Black youth face when it comes to navigating education systems and the labor market. This study used critical discourse analysis to identify a framework for education and workforce development stakeholders that work within the opportunity youth field. The resulting framework is rooted in anti-racism and addresses the profound barriers that restrict access to economic opportunity for Black youth that are sustained by neoliberalism (Reed, 2013; Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2016). Every four years, states are required to submit plans that describe how they will implement opportunity youth policies and programs under the funding guidelines required by WIOA (2014). Simultaneously, local governments and private actors are engaged in activities that inform the state's plan and ultimately, the outcomes. It is my desire that findings from this study will inform the development of future state plans and local opportunity youth efforts. To date, there are very few, if any, conceptual models or frameworks that prioritize economic or racial justice within the opportunity youth initiative.

The discourses that were critically analyzed in this study provided the groundwork for new discourses that can counter the current dominant neoliberal discourses about Black youth in workforce development policies and programs. Findings from this study will be useful for helping policymakers, nonprofits, educators, and others identify processes of neoliberalism and the pervasiveness of race neutrality in public policy. Further, the results may help policymakers develop programs and policy frameworks in workforce development that address structural racism, help youth build power and confront the neoliberal processes working against them. In the final chapter, possibilities for resistance are proposed.

Research Question

Many research studies have examined the negative consequences of race-neutral public policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Davis, 2007; Saito, 2009; Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2009; Dunford-Stenger, Holcomb & Hetling, 2020). Dana-Ain Davis (2007) asserts that "neoliberalism willfully misconstrues and dismisses the reality of racism as a powerful explanatory factor in analyzing persistent racial inequities" (p. 350). Lieberman argues that "color blind policy has compounded the economic and social divide across the racial line." And in *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2017) writes that "the beauty of race-neutral ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white supremacy without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards...thus whites enunciate positions that safeguard their racial interests without sounding 'racist'" (p. 4). Further, critical discourse analysts find that discourses are given legitimacy by certain ideologies, such as neoliberalism (Van Dijk, 1993; Ayers, 2005; Schulz-Forberg & Olsen, 2014; Van Oort, 2015; Smith-Carrier & Lawlor, 2017). According to Schulz-Forberg and Olsen (2014),

> Neoliberalism as an ideology that consists of certain concepts whose meanings change and evolve over time (…) while individual freedom and market economy are certainly core concepts of neoliberalism, they have been interpreted and defined in many different ways, and they have been combined with concepts and ideas which have roots in other ideologies, such as conservatism or social democracy, to fit specific situations or problems. (p. 6)

To achieve the purpose of the study described previously, it was important to examine the role that neoliberal ideology plays discursively in the social construction of opportunity youth (Pateman, 1983; Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2003). Additionally, numerous stakeholders are involved in opportunity youth initiatives as a result of the public-private partnership mandate. The WIOA policy presents an opportunity for these actors to advance the neoliberal project or develop counter discourses. According to Hall (2013), "looking at the discursive strategies each contributor uses, we can see in greater detail how they establish a field of debate, contend with each other, and privilege particularly common-sense framings of an issue" (p. 17). To that end, my research question asks the following: *How are youth constructed by discourses in the opportunity youth initiative?*

This study deployed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the policy discourses located in the policy documents, stakeholder information and news media related to Metro Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. Critical discourse analysts contend that stakeholders in positions of power such as policymakers, nonprofit executives, corporate CEOs and others develop and use discourses that make meaning of social processes in ways to enrich themselves (Fairclough, 1995; Ayers & Carlone, 2007). CDA allowed me to understand the myriad ways that neoliberalism manifests discursively in the Atlanta opportunity youth initiative by focusing

attention on the use of semiotic and linguistic practices in language regarding social problems, such as racism and economic inequality (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Specifically, I selected CDA as the analytical method because it enabled me to identify the manifestations of race-neutral neoliberal discourse, to critique its consequences, and identify possibilities for resistance.

Summary

This research critically analyzed opportunity youth discourses to answer the research question I introduced earlier in this chapter. The purpose of this research is to critique current language practices in the opportunity youth initiative and support new ideas for delivering job training policies and programs in an economy that has a long history of racial exploitation. The chapters that follow will help me achieve those outcomes. In Chapter 2, I provide an extensive review of the existing literature that explores the history of job training policy, the racialized nature of those policies, and the neoliberal context that has shaped discourses regarding Black youth from low-income communities Atlanta. In Chapter 3, I describe the critical discourse analysis model that I used to identify neoliberal discourses within the opportunity youth initiative. In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the analysis, and in Chapter 5, I provide a discussion of the findings, implications and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study investigated the discourses within Atlanta's opportunity youth field. Specifically, the study sought to understand how Black youth are discursively constructed in the opportunity youth field and how stakeholders engage with those discourses. The opportunity youth job training field is a web of complexity that weaves together public policies at the local, state and federal levels and significant involvement from the corporate and nonprofit sectors to deliver training opportunities for youth who are no longer in school nor employed in under-resourced communities. Job training is often proposed as a solution to curb poverty in communities of color, yet many programs fail in meeting that goal (Lafer, 2002; Lafer, 2004; Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, & Jacobs, 2006; Sharone, 2007; Toner, 2011; Baker, Evans, & Hennigan, 2020).

Across the Atlanta area, an estimated 1 in 10 youth ages 16 to 24 are unemployed and not in school (Lewis, 2020). One popular youth discourse suggests that the reason they are unemployed and not in school is because of individual negative experiences at school and other social factors, such as family obligations (Allen, Miles, & Steinberg, 2014; Robert, 2017). For instance, young people are currently coming of age in a period of mass incarceration and zero tolerance policies, where harmful and sometimes deadly interactions with law enforcement are becoming more visible inside and outside the school building and education systems routinely push youth out due to unreasonable academic and discipline standards (Curran, 2019; Legewie & Fagan, 2019).

Here enters opportunity youth policies and programs, which were developed to 'capture' youth who have 'fallen out' of the traditional school system or choose not to continue their education or join the workforce immediately after leaving school (Bridgeland, 2012; Walton,

2018; Aspen Institute, 2019). The phrase opportunity youth was not the categorization always imposed on young people, which I discussed briefly in the opening chapter. But subsequent reporting on the issue of youth unemployment did rise to a higher level of importance for policymakers in recent years. During the Obama era, following the murders of unarmed Black teen Trayvon Martin in 2012, 22 year-old Black man Michael Brown in 2014, and countless others a new Black Lives Matter movement emerged that demanded that the administration find ways to quell social unrest and address systemic issues in communities of color such as inequitable access to education, high-paying jobs, homeownership, and others (Miles, 2015). The federal government commissioned think-tanks to study the opportunity youth issue in partnership with philanthropic organizations. This resulted in a knee-jerk reactions to addressing racism and poverty among the nation's youth, which included the expansion of job training programs. Simultaneously, Congress was preparing to reauthorize the country's federal workforce development legislation, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014. These events culminated in the creation of new opportunity youth policies written into federal law and new mandates for public *and* private stakeholders to compete for resources to implement job training programs for opportunity youth (Jobs for the Future, 2016). Thus, the administration's policy response reinforced the role of private enterprise in the lives of youth even further, insisting that training and employment would address deeply rooted racial injustice (Dumas, 2016).

WIOA was not the first major federal legislation to address youth unemployment. There is a longer, more complicated history of youth unemployment in the United States that is beyond the scope of this study but has been explored in detail in previous work (Kalleberg, 2011; Nilson, 2003; Villalobos, 2017). Job training, also commonly referred to as workforce development or

vocational education that exists on the margins of traditional K-12 and college education, has been a central tenet of the long-lasting "war on poverty" (Goldstein, 2012, p. 18). However, I review the literature to illustrate the major elements of the current legislation that is in effect with some comparison to its predecessors.

The second section of this literature review situates the opportunity youth field in the context of neoliberal welfare-to-work reform to explain the historical, political, social and economic influences of neoliberal ideology on the current system. I systematically review some of the implications of welfare reform on youth that are unemployed today. The third section of this literature review covers the pathologization of youth that gives legitimacy to the creation of job training policies and programs that target opportunity youth. The fourth section explains the role of race-making in opportunity youth policy. And lastly, the final section explains the theoretical lens being used to view the current status of opportunity youth policies and programs as they relate to the participation of Black youth in our current racialized political economy.

Major Legislation Supporting Youth Job Training in the U.S.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, job training policies placed upgrading the skills of the most difficult-to-employ workers as an important part of their goals. These workers included those that experienced long spells of unemployment and those that did not complete high school. In the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter increased funds and focused job training on the "hard-core unemployed" (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993, p. 20). Carter's reforms specifically expanded training for youth who did not complete high school. However, President Ronald Reagan dramatically reversed this policy through the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), sharply cutting funding for programs while shifting the focus of training to lower the cost of training and increase placement rates. This low-cost, performance-based shift under Reagan led to decades of

major reductions in job training opportunities for those who did not complete high school and those that were impacted the most were disproportionately Black men (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Lafer, 2002).

In response to high unemployment, the common response from policymakers has historically been an effort to increase the number of workers available to employers through job training programs, but only in the cheapest way possible (Lafer, 2002). Policymakers argue that by increasing the human capital that the unemployed have to offer in the labor market, they will be able to expand the economy (Lafer, 2002). This response was aided by a neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state, where conservatives like Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan rationalized steep retrenchment in spending for public services like child care assistance, housing assistance, direct cash aid, food stamps, and others while also enacting tax cuts for the wealthy (Zylan & Soule, 2000; Abramovitz, 2012; Scerri, 2017). President Reagan himself was one of the world's most notable neoliberal policymakers, who is famously quoted for stating "government is not the solution to the problem; government *is* the problem" in his inaugural presidential address (Reagan Foundation, 1981). According to Orfield and Ashkinaze in *The Closing Door: Conservative Policy and Black Opportunity* (1993):

> JTPA implemented conservative beliefs in the market and in small government. It said the businessman should control training policy and that policy should aim to satisfy business. Anything that produced a cheap placement was considered efficient and a success. In its enthusiastic pursuit of acceptance by business, however, it risked a new kind of abuse: subsidizing business without accomplishing any clear public purpose. The JTPA law built in massive protections against abuse of federal funds by people being trained, but virtually none against abuses by businesses. (p. 176)

In Atlanta, federal job training programs typically guided Black jobseekers to entry-level occupations with very little potential for economic mobility. The preferences of local employers and federal requirements for low training costs and high placement rates drove the area's workforce development system (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993). As a result of Reagan's neoliberal reforms, the area was given more incentive to screen out the most difficult to serve individuals because federal funding was threatened when metrics were not achieved (Orfield and Ashkinaze, 1993).

Maintaining many of these earlier reforms decades later, President Barack Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) which authorized $10 billion dollars to flow to states to fund job training. Of that $10 billion, $832 million was allocated to states for opportunity youth (Counts, 2017). The law's stated goals are similar to federal job training policies of the past, which include the following:

- Increase access to education, training, and employment – particularly for people with barriers to employment.
- Reduce welfare dependency, increase economic self-sufficiency, meet employer needs, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the nation
- Increase the prosperity of workers and employers (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014)

Like the performance-driven laws of the past, WIOA includes specific provisions for local municipalities and states to develop outcome measures geared specifically towards youth and young adults who are out of school or not working that are between the ages of 16 and 24. In order for states to receive federal funding, they must submit in their state plans:

> A description of the State's strategic vision and goals for preparing and educating a skilled workforce (including preparing youth and individuals with barriers to employment) and for meeting the skilled workforce needs of employers, including goals relating to performance accountability measures based on primary indicators of performance… (Sec. 102. Georgia's Unified State Plan, 2016, p. 21)

The law also requires the appointment of stakeholders to workforce development boards of directors that are established at the state and local levels (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). These boards review and approve plans. The state-level board is appointed by the governor and housed at the Technical College System of Georgia, although in previous years it has shifted from the Department of Labor, to the Governor's Office, and even the Georgia Department of Economic Development. Local governments also have their own plans and boards of directors. Workforce development board members include representatives from many stakeholder groups but it is a statutory requirement that board membership includes business representation (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014).

WIOA is similar to early versions of federal training policies in regards to its neoliberal orientation, but perhaps a relevant difference for this research is the elimination of youth councils. In the previous Workforce Investment Act (WIA), local workforce development boards were required to establish youth councils to inform the development and implementation of job training services for youth and young adults. While the United States Department of Labor encourages this element in state plans, most states and local areas no longer maintain these councils (Villalobos, 2017). The elimination of the youth council requirement has raised concern among training providers that serve youth, especially since a much larger share of training

dollars and programming are mandated to target youth and young adults under WIOA (Villalobos, 2017).

WIOA (2014) does add flexibility for local area agencies to serve more incumbent workers, or workers that are currently employed and need training to transition to another job. WIOA (2014) also authorizes states and LWDAs to reimburse employers for work-based training at higher rates (75 percent) than the previous workforce policies (50 percent), essentially subsidizing wages for workers while they participate in training on the job. Lastly, WIOA (2014) places a much larger emphasis on training that is tied to specific industries. In Georgia, these are referred to as High Demand Career Industries, or HDCI. Those industries include construction, transportation, logistics, information technology, health care, and hospitality. Participants are referred to training in HDCI programs that also lead to industry-recognized certifications (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Under this current design, job training programs have become more attractive for employers in specific sectors to target future employees. In other words, employers in high demand industries have the luxury of hiring trained workers from their own dedicated pool of skilled workers.

According to Barnow and Smith (2015), federally-funded job training programs can be divided into four broad categories:

(a) skill development programs, which increase vocational skills through classroom or on-the-job training

(b) job-development programs, which consist of public employment programs where jobs are specifically created for the participants;

(c) employability development programs, which, according to Butler and Hobbie (1976) emphasize personal attitudes and attributes needed for employment (i.e., what we would now call "soft skills")

(d) work experience programs, which provide employment experiences intended to help workers gain the same attitudes and attributes as employability development programs through paid or unpaid work (p. 128).

These WIOA-funded programs are carried out by nonprofit organizations and technical colleges, or what are referred to in WIOA as eligible training providers (ETPs).

Welfare Reform's Influence on Job Training

One of the biggest issues that Democrats and Republicans continue to agree on that led to the passage of WIOA and its previous versions was that work should be a requirement for the receipt of public assistance (Haskins, 2007; Greene, 2017). As mentioned earlier, one of the goals of WIOA is to reduce welfare dependency (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). By the time the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was signed into law, the concept of a culture of poverty and dependency had already permeated the belief system of many Americans because of a long-held assumption that people – particularly Black people – were not working and instead relying on public benefits (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Guetzkow, 2010; Haskins, 2007). WIOA is understood as a welfare-to-work policy. It is important to understand how neoliberal and racialized welfare reform contributed to the current policy.

The culture of dependency stereotype served as an influential underpinning for welfare-to-work policy beginning as early as the Great Depression of the 1930s (Haskins, 2007; Kornbluh & Mink, 2018; Joseph, 2019). However, the framework grew in popularity in the

second half of the twentieth century. In order to curtail high unemployment, policymakers focused their attention on reducing poverty and the welfare rolls through job training. Employment and training quickly became the "antidote for welfare dependency" (Haskins, 2007, p. 10).

The Culture of Dependency Narrative

In 1973, former Assistant Labor Secretary, advisor to President Nixon, and Democratic United States Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan laid out the common definition of dependency that has shaped the discourse driving conservative reforms that would eventually result in the overhaul of welfare and job training policies. In his book *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income*, Moynihan states the following:

> The issue of welfare is the issue of dependency. It is different from poverty. To be poor is an objective condition; to be dependent, a subjective one as well…. Being poor is often associated with considerable personal qualities; being dependent rarely so...In a world where completed men and women stand on their own feet, persons who are dependent hang (p. 17).

Moynihan's work put a particular emphasis on the family structure of Black families, asserting in his controversial work *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) that "at the center of the tangle of the pathology is the weakness of the Negro family" and "once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (p. 29). Critics argued then and now that Moynihan's insistence that welfare programs enhance dependency on the government and that this behavior is a personal quality undermines the reality of structural racism in the labor market and other societal challenges that

people in poverty are facing. For instance, critics accused Moynihan of relying on stereotypes of the Black family to make a case for national reform by portraying poverty and crime as endemic to the Black community without accounting for the role racism played in disrupting Black lives since enslavement (i.e. residential segregation through redlining, educational segregation, Jim Crow laws) (Haley, 1965; Estes, 2005; Harding, Small & Lamont, 2010; Steinberg, 2011; Salas, 2018). Moynihan's reports were also criticized by Black leaders and civil rights groups like the NAACP for undermining civil rights on the national agenda, creating "a vacuum that could be filled with a politics that blamed Blacks for their own troubles" (Steinberg, 2011, para. 12). In *Blaming the Victim No More: African American Critiques of the Moynihan Report*, Frederico Salas (2018) writes the following:

> It is American society that destroys black communities and not African American families. The way American society destroys African American communities is through discrimination and the unwillingness to support and invest in black communities. In particular, American society ignores the problems that African American communities endure such as unemployment and education. (para. 8)

Despite the criticism, Moynihan's early ideas were written into years of welfare reform that extended across multiple presidential administrations. The Senator's career in national policymaking ended in the years after the PROWRA (1996) was signed into law, marking the most significant turn in welfare policy to date. Ironically, Moynihan opposed the law, as it imposed work requirements and shifted unprecedented authority to state governments to run welfare programs (Haskins, 2007; Gans, 2011).

Despite welfare reforms in the twentieth century that placed a greater focus on employment, millions of welfare recipients have been unable to find and keep a job that pays a

livable wage, which amounts to about $69,000 annually in the United States in 2020 according to MIT's Living Wage Calculator (Lens, 2002; Loprest & Nichols, 2011; Nadeau, 2020). For those who participate in welfare-to-work programs, the jobs that they are placed in rarely pay enough to lift families above the poverty line, or about $22,000 annually for a family of three according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021). For example a recent study of Georgia's welfare program found that most welfare recipients who find work are guided into low-skill jobs that pay well below the poverty threshold. According to the report, "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) leavers appear to graduate into the ranks of the working poor, and the very poor at that, with only 13-15 percent rising above the poverty line" (Bourdeaux and Pandey, 2017, p. 38). The Georgia study shows that job training that is offered through welfare-to-work programs may not be sufficient enough to help very low-income people with a poor record of work experience and low levels of educational attainment navigate a rapidly changing labor market that doesn't guarantee livable wages. Furthermore, welfare-to-work policy bars recipients in some welfare programs such as TANF, child care subsidy programs, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/food stamps) from pursuing the postsecondary education needed to move up the economic ladder (Kassabian, Huber, Cohen, & Giannarelli, 2012; Rowe, Murphy, & Mon, 2010).

Decades of welfare-to-work research allows us to confront and counter the dependency hypothesis that fueled the neoliberal overhaul of welfare in the second half of the twentieth century. In a 2013 report to Congress, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services used administrative welfare program data between 2009 and 2013 to measure welfare dependence. Their longitudinal analysis found that the odds of recipients becoming dependent or more than half of a family's annual income being supplied by TANF, SNAP or social security instead of

wages from employment are low (Crouse & Waters, 2013). Using state administrative and interview data from Oregon, Gonzales, Hudson and Acker (2007) found that TANF recipients in the sample were more likely to receive a job, but "were employed in low-wage jobs that did not provide health insurance or predictable hours" (p. 101). Hoynes (2000) examined longitudinal caseload data between 1987-1992 to estimate any relationship between welfare dependency and labor market conditions. The findings explain that welfare recipients fare better and leave welfare when the rate of average earnings and job opportunities are higher in a given area (Hoynes, 2000).

Engaging in Race-making Through Muted Racism

According to Segal (2006), "welfare policy has focused on targeting resources to address what are euphemistically called 'barriers' that prevent recipients from leaving welfare to work" (p. 232). In welfare-to-work programs, substantial time and resources are spent on screening and forcing clients to identify their own shortcomings that prevent them from obtaining quality careers while blaming them for their own participation in welfare (Segal, 2006). However, racial discrimination in hiring remains one of the most persistent barriers to employment (Diette, Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2018; Katznelson, 2005; Lieberman, 2011; Quillian & Hexel, 2016; Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017). Put another way by Davis (2007), welfare-to-work policies "force recipients into a Kafkaesque low-wage job market with the stunning expectation that nothing would interfere with their individual efforts to move out of poverty - not even racism" (p. 348).

Researchers have found that neoliberal welfare-to-work policies have produced data showing the muted racial differences in outcomes for participants in welfare programs (Segal, 2006; Fellowes & Rowe, 2004; Gais & Weaver 2002; Schram, 2005; Gooden, 2000; Gooden,

2005). These racial dimensions are best seen in the punitive sanctions and restrictions that disproportionately fall on Black recipients. For example, existing research provides evidence that states with higher rates of Black welfare recipients are "more likely to adopt draconian welfare reform policies such as limits on benefits and tougher sanction policies for rules violations" when they are unable to find suitable employment (Segal, 2006, p. 233). Black and Latinx participants are more likely to be sanctioned for not meeting work requirements. Not only do people of color face employment discrimination that can make it more difficult to find and keep a job, research also shows that caseworker discretion informed by implicit or explicit racial biases is reinforced by public perceptions regarding the laziness of welfare participants (Schram, Soss, Fording, and Houser, 2009). Black women and Latinas are more likely to be sanctioned for work requirements than White women (Monnat, 2010).

Reviewing administrative data for cases of client treatment in a welfare-to-work training program, Schram (2005) found that Black participants are significantly less likely than White participants to get referrals to job training. Citing Gooden's (2003) work on racial discrimination in the administration of welfare reform, Segal (2006) writes that the "differential rates at which white [sic] and nonwhite [sic] clients access education and training under welfare reform result not from coincidence or differences in client backgrounds and attitudes, but from unequal treatment by caseworkers" (p. 260). Additionally, most welfare-to-work policies allow states to ban individuals with criminal records from accessing public assistance to find work, many of whom are people of color facing legal discrimination in the job market (Paresky, 2017).

This brief legacy of welfare reform provides an important backdrop for understanding how current discourses shape job training policies. Individualism and race-neutrality are prominent features of neoliberalism, and policies and programs created in the context of

neoliberal welfare reform should be analyzed with this in mind, especially since one of WIOA's goals is to reduce welfare dependency (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Now that I have discussed the linkages between neoliberal welfare reform and job training policies, the next section explores the outcomes of job training programs in general.

Employment and Training Programs: A Mixed Bag

Research studies have examined general participant experiences in the early years of WIOA (2014) policy and its predecessors. The academic literature offers minimal research that examines youth outcomes and experiences that stem from the current law and programs, but one can look to earlier versions of job training programs that have similar aims.

To broadly understand the effectiveness of employment policies and programs that target people from low-income communities, state, local and federal governments commission evaluations that measure the placement rates of people who are exiting programs. Most studies are concerned with the impact that training has on job placement and earnings. Quantitative studies seek to evaluate the impact of training on area economies, to help encourage additional public and private investments in programs.

Heinrich, Mueser, Troske, Jeon and Kahvecioglu (2013) deployed an experimental comparative analysis of job training participation data for individuals exiting training in twelve states. The study authors found that adult participation in training increased quarterly earnings by several-hundred dollars. In terms of employment, participation in job training programs led to higher rates of employment. The caveat here is that the results were not even across all states studied. The researchers note that some states invest more resources per participant than others, which potentially explains more positive outcomes in select states. This finding in the literature underscores the consequence of state flexibility in the development of state plans and budgets for

programs and services. Others have produced research that provides similar earnings and employment findings for adult participation in programs supported by earlier versions of job training legislation (Bloom, 1993; King & Heinrich, 2011; Chrisinger, 2013; Luckett, 2017).

Numerous academic studies also conclude that training participation is not a worthy means to improve economic security for low-income people. For example, in an evaluation of publicly funded training programs, Decker and Berk (2011) found that the programs had little impact on earnings and employment when compared to a control group of individuals who did not participate. In one of very few qualitative studies on the topic, Tomren (2013) interviewed participants in a training program in Delaware to illuminate their experiences in training. In this limited case, the author found that that there was no advantage to participating in the program because employment outcomes were largely unchanged for participants. Finally, Harper-Anderson's (2018) cost-benefit analysis of job training programs found a negative return on investment in the form of employment and earnings for participants.

The literature suggests that job training programs that serve youth face greater challenges (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; Villalobos, 2017; Michaelides, Mueser, & Smith, 2019). Researchers that examined youth participation in job training programs find that many of these youth are homeless, aging out of the foster care system, less likely to have a high school diploma than their peers, and may have prior involvement with the justice system (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007; Feldman & Patterson, 2003; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; Michaelides et al., 2019). Further, young people in job training programs are disproportionately youth of color, meaning they come with their own structural challenges that are often ignored (Michaelides et al., 2019). Despite being more difficult to serve, the evidence needed to determine whether or not job training programs are meaningful or effective programs for youth appears mixed.

Race and Job Training

While there is no shortage of formal evaluations of general programs that are authorized by WIOA and previous job training policies, the more focused examination of the role of race on participation is rare in the literature. Even from what little research does exist, it is difficult to find recent studies and it is difficult to know whether or not these programs help Black youth navigate a racist labor market (Bohmer, 2005; Lang, 2011; Williams, 2018). At best, the research on the possibilities of job training as a method for addressing racial inequities in employment is mixed as well. For example, one study looks at small apprenticeship programs and disaggregates the outcomes by race (Lerman & Pouncy, 1990). Apprenticeship programs deploy an "earn while you learn" model, meaning you earn wages as you are learning specific skills required for a job. Construction, manufacturing, and barbering are common occupations that include apprenticeship models in their training. Black youth who participate in apprenticeships have wage and employment outcomes comparable to White students (Lerman & Pouncy, 1990).

Some studies do find that youth of color pursue job training opportunities that do not necessarily lead to secure employment and higher earnings (Meikeljohn, 2002; Fan, Wei and Zhang, 2017). For example, a study of Black youth job training participants in Detroit found that "Blacks are more likely to self-select themselves into hard-skills jobs, showing that discrimination induces the self-selection of Blacks into certain occupations…this process exacerbates the wealth/wage gap" (Meikeljohn, 2002, p. 353). While there is scant research on the impact of job training policies and programs regarding placements, earnings and other outcomes for youth of color, I am not using this dissertation to call for more quantitative studies on this topic. Instead, more research is needed to understand the role that institutions and policies play in reinforcing unequal access to opportunity for Black youth and how youth themselves

would prefer to experience life as workers, caregivers, parents, students, or any other endeavor. Focusing on their performance in job training programs may risk reinforcing hegemonic neoliberal processes that place the burden of performance accountability on people rather than systems (Harvey, 2007; Apple, 2005).

The Threat of Race-Neutral Neoliberalism

Job training policies and programs emphasize that participants need to change their personal behavior to achieve better employment outcomes. Segal (2006) writes,

> We need to recognize that some barriers, maybe the most important ones affecting welfare recipients, are structural and not individual, and a welfare reform program that fails to address relevant structural race biases and then blames individual recipients for failing to overcome those barriers is therefore itself a race-biased policy. As the example of welfare to work highlights, welfare reform's failure to account for relevant preexisting racial inequalities makes it an ostensibly neutral public policy that incorporates the race biases of the broader society into its very operation and, as a result, ends up helping to produce racial disadvantage among recipients and the poor more generally. (p. 233)

Individualistic, neoliberal job training policies that blame Black participants for their own economic conditions operate as race-neutral, but may still produce disadvantage on the basis of race. Lakes (2008) writes that the "neoliberal rhetoric of individual freedoms and personal responsibility is appealing to true believers of meritocratic success and widening market-based opportunities" (p. 338). This emphasis on individual responsibility undermines the real effects of what Dana-Ain Davis refers to as muted racism. Davis (2007) refers to muted racism as a process in which disinvestments in welfare and the avoidance of labor market discrimination is coordinated with the "free market enterprise of race-blindness" (p. 348). As a result, even though

the policy may not mention race, job training policies and programs were created in a context of the nation's perverse misunderstanding of Black America described in Moynihan's earlier work and the welfare reforms that followed.

Historically, race-neutral policies have reproduced rather than mitigated inequities in the labor market. For example we can look at early attempts to level the playing field for Black Americans in the labor market through race-neutral affirmative action policy. The G.I. Bill offered the American government the opportunity to level the playing field for Black servicemen returning from World War II and promote economic prosperity for future generations. But even a policy that included substantial benefits for Black people was limited by pervasive legal discrimination in their home states. In *When Affirmative Action was White,* Katznelson (2005) argued that the G.I. Bill was actually designed to extend Jim Crow to servicemen returning home from World War II. The G.I. Bill expanded prosperity almost exclusively for White men and women who were able to take advantage of the program, while "differential treatment meted out to African Americans sharply curtailed the statute's powerful egalitarian promise and significantly widened the country's large racial gap" (p. 141). This is an example of a program that may have intended to create equal access to opportunity but failed on its egalitarian promise. When Black people applied for job assistance as G.I. Bill recipients, their cases were handled mainly by white people tasked with "channeling African American veterans into 'Black jobs' in the North as well as the South, reinforcing the existing division of labor by race" (Katznelson, 2005, p. 138).

There is no shortage of evidence for muted racism in the labor market. According to Pager, Devah, and Shepherd (2008), "today it is harder to assess the degree to which everyday experiences and opportunities may be shaped by ongoing forms of discrimination" (p. 6). Their

work details the many ways that discrimination has permeated our public systems and continues to exacerbate inequality in jobs access. Pager et al. (2008) found that racial discrimination, although less overt, still occurs in employment, housing, education, and other areas of social life since even after the passage of major civil rights laws. Bertrand and Mullainathan's (2004) study found that qualified job applicants with names that were easily identified by name as Black were 50 percent less likely than White applicants to receive a call back for job interviews.

Job training policy is viewed as neoliberal policy because it is based on the perceived failings of individuals and considered to be race-neutral. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2007) argues that "individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one's own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property" (p. 65). Davidson and Saull (2017) write the following about race-neutrality in neoliberalism:

> While there is little reference to questions of race and or how racialized practices and hierarchies may condition the operation of neoliberal models of political economy, there is also an implicit - and sometimes explicit - suggestion that neoliberalism will erase racism from the economy through the consequences of rational and individualized economic preferences. (p. 589)

Neoliberalism, Henry Giroux (2015) argues, is a form of terrorism. According to Giroux (2015), neoliberalism "abstracts economics from ethics and social costs, makes a mockery of democracy, works to dismantle the welfare state, thrives on militarization, undermines any public sphere not governed by market values, and transforms people into commodities" (p. 79). As a project based largely on individualism, race-neutral neoliberalism seeks to divert society away from investments in social welfare and towards strategies that will ultimately lead to higher

rates of capital accumulation. For example, WIOA places importance on the production of human capital necessary to maximize corporate profits (Shin & Ging, 2019). The very need for an increase in workers is manufactured by corporations that insist that there are gaps in the workforce, and they are unable to find talent (Giroux, 2015; Spring, 2016; Shin & Ging, 2019). This process results in the involvement of corporations in the design of public education and job training programs that will satisfy employer needs for human capital (Reed, 2013; Spring, 2016). According to Turner, (2014), "such a project fundamentally alters the relationship between youth on the one hand and the state, the education system and the processes of consumption on the other, creating a subject capable of tolerating the new harsh conditions inspired by neoliberalism" (p. 9).

Situating Opportunity Youth in this Neoliberal Context

Ossei-Owusu (2012) argues that youth of color must be placed at the center of our critique of the neoliberal state since they are the "future objects of poverty management" (p. 297). Similarly, Giroux (2008) writes that "youth provide a powerful referent for a critical discussion about the long-term consequences of current policies," and therefore it is important "to register youth as the theoretical, moral, and political center of gravity" (p. 113). However, few scholars have examined the intersection of Black youth and neoliberalism outside of the formal K-12 education context (Giroux, 2008; Ossei-Owusu, 2012; Love, 2012; Baldridge, 2014; Baldridge, Beck, Medina, & Reeves, 2017; Brown, Outley & Pinckney, 2018; Ladier, Herr, & Bergeson, 2020).

It is within a neoliberal and race-neutral context that youth have become a more central focus of WIOA job training policies and programs. Commonly referred to as N.E.E.T. (not in education, employment or training) - in other countries, opportunity youth refers to youth in the

United States between the ages of 16 and 24, who are not in school and not working (Bridgeland, 2012). The language used to describe out-of-school and unemployed youth in educational settings and beyond has undergone several transitions over time. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, these youth have had many labels, including “at risk”, “delinquent”, or “disconnected” (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Bork, 2012). The shift to opportunity youth is the latest discursive effort to reframe youth in a less “pejorative” way than the previously used terms (Bridgeland and Milano, 2012, p. 12).

According to Smyth, Robinson and McInerney (2014), “it is true that creating programs that exist on the edge of the education system is humane, and while they work in less instrumental ways with young people, they do not improve what is occurring in mainstream schooling, and in some ways let the mainstream off the hook” (p. 493). In response to the need to get youth re-engaged in education and training and meet the needs of employers, job training programs and initiatives that exist outside of the traditional public school or higher education system are proposed as a means to meet employer demands. It is argued that these programs are more equipped to serve youth that are not enrolled in public education settings because schools have failed them, although as discussed earlier there is little understanding in the literature if job training programs meet the needs of youth. On a cautionary note, this neoliberal logic of public school failure extends to the youth employment domain, and is commonly used to rationalize an expansion of school choice via charter schools, school vouchers, alternative schools, and other forms of school reform (Apple, 2005; Lipman, 2013; Dumas, 2013; Dumas, 2016).

Youth who are not in the traditional education system have been marginalized through various means as a result of neoliberal governance in public education, including punitive discipline policies, an increase in policing within schools, school closures in low-income

communities of color, and high-stakes performance accountability testing (Lipman, 2013; Dumas, 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Turner & Beneke, 2020; Rasco, 2020). For instance, Sellers and Arrigo (2018) argue that zero tolerance discipline policies are a form of neoliberal social dominance used to control students who are seen to have "no market value and are identified as flawed consumers because of their associations with crime and poverty, redundancy and expendability" (p. 66). Pressures to meet strict testing goals have also contributed to a destructive culture that pushes students out of the classroom and makes them more vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline (Lipman, 2013; Dumas, 2016; Brown et al., 2020). According to Bohte and Meier (2000), schools are often incentivized to remove students who are causing problems due to an increased emphasis on performance accountability tests. Research has also found that Black youth are dealt with what Monroe (2006) refers to as an *uneven hand* in which they are targeted for disciplinary action and suspended at high rates than their White peers (Monroe, 2006, p. 46; Dumas, 2013; Wikline, 2019).

Governmentality and Pathology

Governmentality is essential to the neoliberal project, as it legitimizes the role of the private sector, family, and the individual to identify race-neutral solutions to problems facing opportunity youth—solutions that are determined without political debate (Foucault et al., 1991; Goldberg, 2009; Dumas, 2016)**.** Using Spence's (2012) definition, neoliberal governmentality is "the collective logic used to generate knowledge about populations, institutions, and spaces, as well as problems and solutions" (p. 140). Deficit narratives about Black youth are common exemplars of neoliberal governmentality, in which Black youth are constructed as damaged and in need of a public–private help (Dumas, 2016). For example, in 2014 remarks from the first Black United States President Barack Obama during a launch of the administration's My

Brother's Keeper initiative for Black boys and young men following the murders of Black youth Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the following was stated:

> We can help give every child access to quality preschool and help them start learning from an early age, but we can't replace the power of a parent who's reading to that child. We can reform our criminal justice system to ensure that it's not infected with bias, but nothing keeps a young man out of trouble like a father who takes an active role in his son's life. (Dumas, 2016, p. 96)

The president's speech provided a decidedly ideological argument for a government retreat from addressing systemic racism while providing the rationale for shifting away from government solutions to the problems affecting Black youth the most (Dumas, 2016).

Historically, low-income Black youth have been considered a problem that needs saving in the dominant discourse (Baldridge, 2014). Given the neoliberal and race-neutral context of job training policy, it is important to understand how neoliberal governmentality operationalizes pathological discourses about young people in job training research, praxis and policymaking. Through the neoliberal project, youth become subjects that are "decontextualized, white-washed of any historical experiences or differences (e.g. class, gender, race), and treated solely as a private problem," writes Turner (2014, p. 10). Neoliberalism sustains harmful characterizations of Black youth through pathologizing rhetoric that "frames Black youth throughout educational discourse with themes of deficiency that warrant their saving" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 444). Neoliberalism also depends on damaging narratives that define Black youth in the broader discourse in order to privatize services intended to serve them (i.e. schools, job training programs, etc.) (Lipman, 2013; Sellers & Arrigo, 2018; Brown et al., 2020; Turner & Beneke, 2020). Black youth have been characterized as disadvantaged, culturally deprived, at risk, and

disconnected, and the discourses tied to each of these terms shape education policies and initiatives (Martinez & Rury, 2012; Sellers and Arrigo, 2018). As a result, policies and programs intended to serve youth may "both reaffirm and reproduce deficit narratives about youth of color" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 445).

The Economic Burden

Neoliberal governmentality refers not only to policy implementation, but also to the logic used to frame policy recommendations, enable policy discourses, and determine the metrics for policy evaluation. As Dumas (2016) writes, "policy is not just what evolves in the end; it is the truth generated about the problem itself" (p. 98). One of those logics is the economic impact of opportunity youth.

In 2015, a report titled *Vulnerable Youth: Employment and Job Training Programs* was submitted to Congress focusing on opportunity youth. The analysis found that opportunity youth are most likely to be youth of color and almost twice as likely to be poor than in-school youth. In addition to providing a snapshot of who opportunity youth are, Fernandes-Alcantara (2015) emphasizes that "youth who are disconnected may pose a financial burden if they rely on cash and non-cash assistance programs, or if they become homeless" (p. 35). The author also notes that "in an increasingly global economy and with retirement underway for Baby Boomers, society is seen as having a strong interest in ensuring that all young people have the educational attainment and employment experience to become skilled workers, contributing taxpayers, and participants in civic life" (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015, p. 35).

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, reducing opportunity youth dependency on welfare is a goal of WIOA (2014), so neoliberals find it important to assess the potential economic value derived from implementing the policy. Several others add to the study of costs associated with

opportunity youth to underscore the need for job training. For example, social research organization Measuring America estimates that as a result of youth disconnection from jobs, the country misses out in about $93 billion in new revenues every year (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018). Their study looks at specific geographic locations, including Atlanta, Dallas, District of Columbia and Los Angeles. The authors predict that the "average potential savings for re-engaging youth in government costs ranges from about $1500 for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to an average of over $35,000 a year in incarceration costs per individual" (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018, p. 13). Citing research from the PricewaterhouseCoopers corporation, the authors advise that the impending automation of low-skill jobs will require that young people are prepared for careers that are at a lower risk for automation, such as careers in the science and technology fields. Lewis and Gluskin (2018) go on to warn that "remaining competitive in the global economy will require a skilled workforce prepared for the jobs of the future - if we don't prepare our youth for the changing work environment of tomorrow, society at large will pay the price" (p. 15). This is a hefty burden to place on the backs of youth, but the logics of competitiveness, disposability, and globalization are central themes of neoliberalism (Dumas, 2016; Brown et al., 2020).

In 2012, Belfield, Levin and Rosen authored a report titled the *Economic Value of Opportunity Youth* to the White House Council for Community Solutions. The White House Council for Community Solutions was created through an executive order signed by President Barack Obama in 2010 (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010). The Council was tasked with aligning federal education, workforce development, and economic development policies and maximizing the deployment of federal dollars by implementing local partnerships to address a variety of issues, including the employability skills of people in high-poverty cities. In

the executive summary of the report, the writers estimate the tax burden of opportunity youth. They reveal the following estimates:

> We estimate that the total taxpayer burden for each under-attached Opportunity Youth is $215,580. The total social burden is $596,640 per youth. These figures represent threshold values for deciding on the optimal investment in such youth. That is, investments up to this amount to ensure that Opportunity Youth are fully productive would pay for themselves. Across the 3.3 million such youth, the total fiscal loss is $707 billion and the total social loss is $1.96 trillion. (Belfield et al., 2012, p. 3)

The report goes on to assert that the development of human capital through job training is essential for regular positive employment outcomes and a growing economy. Focusing on employer needs, Belfield et al. (2012) argue "employers look for a smooth trajectory of activity and progress for their future workers, a process by which the young continually acquire workplace skills and acclimate to the demands of the workplace" (p. 4).

Policy actors outside of the school are not the only ones who have increased their attention to addressing the financial burden of opportunity youth. Public schools are also called to take on this responsibility of ensuring youth don't become opportunity youth to begin with. In his essay, Lakes (2008) reviews the 2007 report from the New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. The goal of the report is to explain to educators how they must strengthen their roles in preparing the next workforce. One of the primary goals of the report is to make the link between the teacher's responsibility to educate as well as prepare a workforce that will be ready to grow the economy, another logic of neoliberalism (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Lakes, 2008; Dumas, 2016). In order to measure success, the commission recommends a national benchmark or exit exam, that Lakes (2008) describes as

a “national sorting machine.” Lakes (2008) points to a line in the report where authors argue that “ending taxpayer supported public education after tenth grade will save close to $70 billion, claim financial analysts associated with the report - a factor the commissioners clearly hope will sway neoliberal stakeholders to their proposed restructuring of secondary education” (p. 3).

The Youth Crime Complex

Job training policies and initiatives are also understood as a way to curb youth crime, in particular summer jobs programs (Heller, 2014; Ross & Kazis, 2016; Davis & Heller, 2020; Cook, 2020). Several evaluation studies examine the outcomes of summer youth jobs programs and their impact on crime. These evaluations alone come at a price, as municipalities have spent millions of public tax dollars to hire consultants to measure the impact of youth employment programs on crime rates. The most famous studies are conducted in places like Boston (Modestino, 2017), New York (Valentine, Anderson, Hossain, & Unterman, 2017) and Chicago (Reichert & Ridge, 2015). One report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor and authored by think tank Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), who received over $1,000,000 in contracts to conduct the evaluation, found that there were no long-term employment and earnings outcomes in New York City’s Summer Youth Employment Program (Valentine et al., 2017). Summer jobs programs remain a popular choice for policymakers and philanthropists interested in reducing youth crime rates (Modestino, 2017).

Research studies suggest that when young people don’t have any productive opportunities during the summer months, they are more likely to be involved in criminal activity, including drug use and gun violence (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2017; Davis & Heller, 2020). These perceptions of negative behavior support deficit narratives about Black youth, suggesting that they are more prone to crime than others, although research shows that Black youth and

adults are policed at higher rates than other groups (Baldwin, 2018; Howell, Skoczylas, & DeVaughn, 2019). Simultaneously, this discourse fails to address the heightened proximity to police in Black communities during a time of prolonged police brutality spurred by anti-Black racism in schools, in neighborhoods, and in many other domains of social life (Love, 2016; Dumas, 2016; Waldron, 2020).

I discuss here the relationship between employment initiatives and criminality discourses because of what Zatz (2020) and Selman, Myers, and Goddard (2019) describe as the "shadow carceral state", another mechanism of neoliberal governmentality. According to Selman et al., (2019), "shadow measures in the school and community mark some young people as 'dangerous,' 'high-risk,' or 'unsafe,' and structure the day-to-day lives of youth outside the workforce and the cellblock, functioning as a key mechanism for maintaining inequality" (p. 527). Key actors responsible for forming policy logics like the think tank Urban Institute (1992) have a history of pathologizing youth in this way. In 1992, the Urban Institute reported that youth between the ages of 16 and 24 have "characteristics and experiences that put them at risk of developing problem behaviors and outcomes that have the potential to hurt their community, themselves or both" (p. 13).

Turner (2014) writes that neoliberalism creates the "youth crime complex" (p. 10), which enables programs tailored to address at-risk youth. The youth-as-criminal discourse fosters policies that construct a neoliberal subject "who claims responsibility for his/her actions, a strategy which ultimately shifts the responsibility for crime control from the state to the individual and the community" (p. 10). As a result, youth programs responsible for fixing youth problems are "steeped in the ethos of neoliberalism" (p. 10), extending neoliberal

governmentality's notion that school failure or criminal activity is a byproduct of personal irresponsibility rather than structural failures (Turner, 2014).

Governmentality in the Black Mecca

These various neoliberal logics operate in Atlanta's current field of job training policies and initiatives. Atlanta is a region that has a long history of job training initiatives that were largely driven by federal and state policy. Atlanta has also been active in the creation of job training programs that specifically target youth since the 1970s (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993). The region was home to one of the largest public employment programs approved under the Carter Administration (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993). The program was highly favored by Black residents, but changes in political leadership implicated the way that cities and counties could administer job training. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan abolished the program and ushered in a phase of "roll-out neoliberalism" (Ayers & Carlone, 2007, p. 462), a period where policies were passed that prioritized the reduction in government through privatization, the intentional weakening of job training organizations, and the deregulation of private industry (Peck & Tickell, 2000; Ayers & Carlone, 2007).

When there is attention given to the challenges facing poor Black youth who are overrepresented among Atlanta's unemployed, the neoliberal assumption is that the challenges can be solved by the combination of job creation and job training programs (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Hobson, 2017). This has been a longstanding logic, despite the various concerns about job training described earlier in this chapter. In his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson (1987) argued that the challenges facing poor Black people are caused by the isolation of "lower-class blacks" and the transformation of the economy. He argued that the best solution was a race-neutral policy of maximum job creation and tight labor markets,

which would open opportunities for Black residents (Wilson, 1987). Wilson's (1987) assessment informed the political debate that inspired economic development goals for urban areas with high populations of Black residents, Atlanta among them (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993). Wilson's logic has long been adopted by Atlanta's political and corporate leaders who argue that creating enough jobs and making sure Black youth have the right skills and credentials necessary to compete for employment would solve the youth unemployment problem (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Lafer, 2002; Levine, 2017).

Metro Atlanta remains a key place to observe how Wilson's logic – one that aligns with the logics of neoliberal governmentality (Dumas, 2016) – influences youth job training initiatives. The region has experienced record job growth in recent years. In 2019, the Atlanta area ranked 6th in job growth, outpacing the nation (Knox, 2019). The area continues to create jobs at a faster pace than its population growth (Knox, 2019). In addition, Atlanta is understood as the center of Black political power and Black professional class success (Hobson, 2017). In 1987, the *Christian Science Monitor* referred to Atlanta as the mecca of the Black middle class, describing the city as the "seat of Black achievement in the United States." Today, Atlanta is still referred to as the Black mecca, as it houses some of the nation's most well-known Black educational institutions, increased its population of the Black middle-class, and has been a model of Black mayoral power since the 1970s (at the time of this study, Atlanta has elected a Black mayor for every term since Maynard Jackson was first elected in 1974) (Hobson, 2017). Atlanta also has a rich legacy of Black and White civic and community leaders working together to stand apart from other southern cities when it came to the racial tension and unrest that marked the 1960s, positioning Atlanta as the "city too busy to hate" (Williams, 2015, p. 2). Mayor Maynard Jackson championed affirmative action policies and helped place the world's largest airport on

the Southside of the city, bringing thousands of jobs to the area (Williams, 2015). Today, 30 Fortune 1000 companies are headquartered in Atlanta and contributing to economic growth. In 2018, Atlanta was ranked as the number one place for Black residents to do well economically by *Forbes Magazine*, where the author wrote that "with its [Atlanta] historical black [sic] universities and strong middle class, [Atlanta] has long been described as the black capital of America, and its thriving entertainment scene has given rise to claims that it has become a cultural capital as well" (Toone, 2020, para. 4).

While all of these developments in Atlanta are positive in some ways, they are not immune from critique. Despite record job growth and Black leadership, critics argue that the area has also expanded racial and economic inequality (Williams, 2015; Partnership for Southern Equity, 2016). Courting business and using economic development as the superior growth model has impacted opportunities of low-income Black youth (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Williams, 2015; Hobson, 2017). This courting process is common in neoliberal supply-side economics, where politicians, corporate and nonprofit executives, and others rationalize economic policies that lead to sharp reductions in spending for services such as public schools and welfare while facilitating large tax cuts for high income households and corporations (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Zatz, 2020). In Orfield and Ashkinaze's (1993) study of the impact of Black leadership on economic opportunity in Atlanta, they argue the following:

> Communities experiencing dramatic growth tend to celebrate the wonder of the expansion, the stories of fortunes made, the optimistic sense of progress and possibilities. They tend to have a politics dominated by development and a vision of government as a facilitator of investment. Business is at the center and is courted rather than seriously

regulated by government. Business expansion is expected to solve many problems. (p. 49)

Atlanta is ranked as the most racially segregated place in the United States (Pooley, 2015). For more than 30 years, Atlanta has held the title for having the highest levels of income inequality in the nation (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Williams, 2015; Partnership for Southern Equity, 2016) while Georgia is also ranked as the number one place for businesses to launch and grow (Georgia Department of Economic Development, 2019).

It is important to note that Atlanta's Black leadership is not exclusively responsible for these outcomes while neoliberalism is the backdrop of the city's economic growth and employment strategy. Gilroy (2013) argues that the "poetics" of neoliberalism "operate very powerfully, and unrecognized, when it appears in blackface" (p. 26). Goldberg (2009) describes this as racial neoliberalism, in which the achievements of Black people in the United States, in particularly the Black professional class, provide evidence that the state and the market are not inherently racist. Consequently, Black youth who occupy the lower rungs of the economic ladder are not the victims of racism; instead "they failed to take advantage of opportunities for self-governance (and investment) ostensibly available to all, regardless of race" (Dumas, 2016, p. 100).

It is understood that the state requires intraracial managerial relationships "which become complicit in a larger anti-Black politics that advances rightist discourses about Black pathology and dismisses the need for structural solutions to material problems in Black life" (Dumas, 2016, p. 100). Black political control of municipal governments and educational institutions cannot solve these deeply rooted problems. Black leaders play a limited role in many of the policy issues affecting economic opportunity for young people and they are under pressure to follow

conservative economic development policies to lure and retain business in the city (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2021).

This context has facilitated the expansion of Atlanta's job training initiatives in recent years. In recognition of high unemployment rates among youth and the reauthorization of the Obama-era Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), local initiatives emerged to create an environment where youth – even those who did not complete high school or did not have college credentials – could participate in Atlanta's economic expansion under the veil of economic inclusion (Partnership for Southern Equity, 2016). For example, in 2015, the 100K Opportunities Initiative launched in Atlanta with the goal of hiring 100,000 youth by the year 2018 with support from companies such as Wal Mart, Starbucks, and others. This public-private partnership – a subject in the discursive web analyzed in this study – seeks to improve the employability of opportunity youth while simultaneously improving job retention and maximizing profits for employers. Other local stakeholders, such as chambers of commerce and city governments, organize large employers to attend job fairs and commit to hiring opportunity youth who participate in job preparation (resume-writing workshops, dress-for-success modules, etc.) (Miles & Nemoy, 2017). Corporations participate in the job fairs with the understanding that they will be able to recruit new talent and improve the profitability and productivity of their businesses (Miles & Nemoy, 2017).

Private corporations are directly involved in Atlanta's opportunity youth job training initiatives. For example, the InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), which is headquartered in the Atlanta area, matches corporate donations with federal WIOA funds to implement a youth employment training program known as Generation Atlanta, which is managed and operated by global human capital consulting firm McKinsey and Company. In this short eight-week program,

opportunity youth are trained for hospitality jobs in IHG's Atlanta-area hotels (Atlanta CareerRise, 2018). Also in Atlanta, the Atlanta Regional Commission has launched a Social Welfare Program Initiative (SWPI), that enrolls youth under the age of 24 who are recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Medicaid into a short-term industry specific skills-training programs with the goal of removing them from welfare (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2018).

Conclusion

All of the context discussed in this chapter is important for understanding the theoretical and historical logics of neoliberalism in job training policies and initiatives. Specifically, Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative has emerged in these controversial contexts, making it a key site for critique. In the spirit of neoliberalism, research on Black youth and their perceptions of education and employment rests almost exclusively on individual effort. New research must command a more critical analysis of how the features of neoliberalism socially construct Black youth who are unemployed and not in school. It is also important to analyze the role that institutions – government, nonprofits, businesses – play in facilitating neoliberal logics (Dumas, 2016) or common sense (Hall, 2013) about the economy, schooling, and Black youth. It is especially important to critically analyze how policy itself sustains that common sense.

To get us there, the next chapter details the methodology – Critical Discourse Analysis – that was used to identify the manifestations of neoliberal logic in Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To answer the research question posed in Chapter 1, I developed an analytical framework that combines some elements of critical policy studies (CPS) with critical discourse analysis (CDA). The framework is derived from theories commonly associated with observations of the way language, ideologies, and race impact the formation of public policies and practices. Critics argue that neoliberalism is viewed as an intractable ideology and suggest instead that neoliberalism can be translated into policy in different ways, depending on social contexts (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2012; Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013; Reed, 2018). In this view, neoliberalism as an ideology takes on meaning through a process where concepts from different social contexts come into contact with each other and influence political interpretation and action. This process of meaning-making is referred to as translation (Peck & Tickell, 2002), whereby stakeholders within a policy field, such as job training select neoliberal features from ideas available to them within the broader social context and use them in ways discursively that can trigger policy choices (Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013; Reed, 2018). The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that translation process in the context of race-neutral neoliberalism, youth job training policies and public-private partnerships. Further, the purpose is to offer a critique of the language practices deployed by stakeholders through policy documents and different forms of media to understand the way neoliberal logics appear in the opportunity youth discursive web.

The study drew heavily from discourse analysts who distinctly focus on the role of power in constructing the world, joining others who assert that "structures of domination in society are (re)produced through discourse" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 61). CDA builds on the works of power

theorists such as Foucault, who contends that discursive text analyses "should be concerned with both discourse as an instrument of power and control as well as with discourse as the instrument of the social construction of reality" (quoted in Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 9).

The first section of this chapter will outline the conceptual tools deployed in this CDA of Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. The second section will expand on the method used, data collected, and the analytical roadmap I pursued in this study.

Rational-Technical vs. Critical Policy Studies

To conduct this study, I combined features of critical policy studies with CDA. I approached this study from a critical lens that argues that the logics and themes of neoliberalism facilitate the development of opportunity youth policies and initiatives, which is a departure from the traditional, rational, technocratic approach to policy analysis common among policy analysts in the field of education and workforce development (Hall, 2013; Lakes, 2008; Ayers & Carlone, 2007).

Human capital policymaking is understood as a rational process. The policy choices are shaped by data derived from assessments of programs and the economic costs associated with those programs (Sinha, 2014; Tan, 2014; Spring, 2015). According to Rizvi and Lingard (2010) there are a variety of events that have weakened the use of rational approaches to policy development. For one, rational policy processes do not exactly produce evidence that could be replicated across multiple systems and policy contexts. Second, positivist views, views that prioritized absolutes and were largely responsible for the creation of a rationalist approach to policymaking were debunked as new developments in the social sciences began to emerge and challenge these views in the late twentieth and twenty-first century (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Policy creation communities are also a major component of the rational policymaking process,

where the influence for policy extends beyond the nation-state governmental entities and includes a variety of actors in both the public and private spheres (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Souto-Otero, 2014). For example, in criminal justice policy in the United States, local governments work in concert with private enterprise to bring financial resources to the table and influence criminal justice policy. In the case of prisons, the government and for-profit entities have used rational policy choices to institutionalize public-private partnerships that - on paper - aim to reduce costs and increase efficiency of incarceration (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Turner, 2014; Zatz, 2020). Consequently, incarceration becomes a government subsidized, privately run enterprise where increases in the prison population can result in profit dividends for privately-run prisons (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Zatz, 2020). Although neoliberal concerns of efficiency have facilitated the growth of privately-run prisons in the United States, rational policymaking has pushed the responsibility of incarcerating people into a domain with little-to-no accountability at all (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The same process has been applied in job training policy, where policy is statutorily shaped by a policy creation community that includes corporations, government actors, philanthropic organizations, and other institutions collaborating to make job training programs and the individuals that complete them more employable. Driven by data detailing high-demand needs of the future workforce, we have witnessed a proliferation of policies that have made job training a key contributor to neoliberal, free-market reforms in economic development and in education policy (Lafer, 2002; Smith & Kahn, 2004; Lakes, 2008; Ayers & Carlone, 2007).

I objected to the rational approach to workforce policy development in this study because it fails to account for the role of political contestation among policy actors such as politicians, nonprofits, philanthropists, and corporate executives (Dumas, 2016), the unequal distribution of

power between youth job training participants and corporations (Giroux, 2016), or the ways in which race and class subjugation shapes labor market outcomes (Dickinson & Oaxaca, 2009; Restifo, Roscigno, & Qian, 2013; Schmitz, 2017; Quillian, Pager & Hexel, 2017; Lang & Spitzer, 2020). Corporate lobbyists play a substantial role in funding policy priorities, either through their own business or through other vehicles (Miller, 2010; Miller and Mooney, 2010). For example, larger corporations may employ lobbyists and make direct financial contributions to political campaigns (Miller & Mooney, 2010). They may also act through associations, such as chambers of commerce, to advance business-centric policy priorities or fund lobbying activities by donating to community or national foundations. The implicit effects of neoliberal, rational approaches to policy formation – individualism, increased private influence in government, etc. – is evidenced through its existence in practice but even more-so by its absence in the analysis of public policy (Harvey, 2007; Hall, 2013). There are very real consequences of neoliberal ideologies and market influences as they function in our society and more specifically in our job training policies in Atlanta. The stealth influence of neoliberalism in the formation of workforce policies creates the ideal conditions for racial and class inequality to grow (Hall, 2013; Cahill, 2015).

Lastly, the rational approach to policymaking lacks racial realism, as Derrick Bell (1991) describes it. Racial realism, a race-conscious view of the formation of policy recognizes the history of white supremacy in the United States and its lingering effects in policy. Critical analysis of public policy adapts racial realism by asserting that an acknowledgement of racism must be central to class analysis. In a comparative piece on rational versus critical approaches to policy formation in the education policy realm, Buras (2013) captures my objection to the rational approach pointedly:

> For critical policy analysts, it turns out the 'gold standard' [the rational approach to policy analysis] isn't so golden. Not only does it threaten to produce a truncated understanding of complex issues because of reductive formulae, but it also fails to address the fact that policy makers don't act neutrally in a world where color and cash matter. (p. 221)

This study required an approach to policy analysis that understands that neoliberalism has played a crucial role in reinforcing and expanding economic and racial disparities by inviting in discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of private capital into the public sphere, and race-neutrality. I follow the view of critical scholars of neoliberalism who agree that neoliberals construct policies and programs that "conveniently deny structural and ideological bases of persistent racial disparities" (Lipman, 2013, p. 12).

Critical analysis of policy looks deeply into the power inequities inherent in policy development. These inequities are inherent often because of the competing interests that are at play at almost every stage of the policymaking process (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Critical analysis also takes into account the notion that policymaking is not at all a linear process. These processes are normally discursive and are influenced by the larger social, economic, and political context. Additionally, public policies are normally a statement or prioritization of values. Critical policy analysis addresses the values that are placed at the center of a specific issue, and questions for whom the policy would be the most valuable (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Through policy, values are often unevenly distributed in society, making certain resources available to some and unavailable to others (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Critical Discourse Analysis

As mentioned earlier, rational approaches to policy and discourse analysis fail to account for various factors, but one with substantial consequences if ignored is the *discourse* that legitimizes policy and its effects on the construction of reality. Critical policy analysis is similar to critical discourse analysis (CDA). There is an emphasis on "the cultural and historical acts of meaning making" (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 369). In other words, discourses that are embedded in speech or text are analyzed as domains of power struggle through CDA (Gale, 1999). All documents, including regulations or legislation, are a product of social interaction in a contextualized place and time. Policy documents and media reflect the subjectivity and ideology of authors as well as the numerous social and political positions of a particular historical moment (Gale, 1999; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Van Dijk, 2013).

Stephen Ball (1997) distinguishes between policy as discourse and policy as text and draws from Foucault's frame of discourse as a technology that produces knowledge and truth. Ball (1997) writes that policy discourse "articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment" (p. 23). In this manner, discourse is considered the rules of the game that encode and decode policy texts that constrain (and enable) their meanings while establishing "discursive limitations" (Gale, 1999, p. 395).

Ball (1993) developed an analytical framework where policy analysis may be understood in terms of policy as text, policy as discourse and policy effects. The approach to analyzing the role of power used in Ball's discursive framework is situated in the Foucauldian analysis of power, where power is not viewed as just something used by one dominant or elite group to oppress the other. It is an arrangement between stakeholder groups filled with negotiation and

contestation as they work to shape policy discourses. Even legislative texts, memos to state agencies, and media articles referencing the policy are negotiated products of people, communities and ideological positions that are negotiated in the realm of neoliberalism (Ball, 1993; Gale, 1999).

Gale (1999) also expands the notion of policy as text and discourse, emphasizing the role of context in the policy process. According to Gale (1999), "decisions are influenced by the material and social circumstances within which those decisions are made" (p. 398). This underscores the importance of Fairclough's intertextuality in CDA, where Gale argues that there is an intertextual relationship between policy texts and discourse. Gale (1999) writes that "policy texts rely on surrounding texts (their context) to assist in the determination of their meaning…contexts are collections of texts connected together" (p. 399). Discursive contexts have material effects on policy, and thus on the real world. Therefore it is important to consider in the analysis which texts beyond the policy documents reflect the contexts inform discourses.

In the current study, the combined sociopolitical effects of discourse and policy on issues such as racial justice and economic inequity are essential. This is the domain where the worlds of text production and negotiation play out in the real world and in the real lives of people. In effect, these discourses, and their textual artifacts (policy documents, memos, news articles, visual media) mediate the world for the social actor. According to Taylor (1997),

> Policy documents can be said to constitute the official discourse of the state. Thus policies produced by and for the state are obvious instances in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs that work to mask social conflict and foster commitment to the notion of universal public interest. In this way,

> policy documents produce real social effects through the production and maintenance of consent. (p. 25)

As a methodological approach, this CDA of texts addressed key aspects of Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative, which is not separate from neoliberal contexts as discussed in Chapter 2.

I chose to focus critically on discourse because I recognize that discourses are influential in the formation and implementation of policy, and far from "irreducible to language and to speech" (Foucault, 1974 p.49); it is more than that. I am setting out to understand how Black youth are constructed by job training policy discourses and how stakeholders engaged with those discourses. As Ball (2006) states poetically:

> We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. We are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows. We do not 'know' what we say, we 'are' what we say and do. In these terms we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies…There is little opportunity for obvious adversarial responses to this process of subjugation. (p. 48)

While it is possible to examine neoliberal discourses through Foucault's political analysis of systems, it is Fairclough who provides a way to observe these systems through textual analysis. This is important given the significant ways that texts legitimize structures of power (Ball, 2006; Wodak and Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2016). I am situating Fairclough's method of CDA within the frameworks of neoliberal governmentality, Foucault's theories of power, and critical policy studies (Ball, 1993; Ball, 2006; Gale, 1999).

Constructing The Discursive Web

Continuing to draw from Foucault, I agree that power operates "through a multiplicity of forces, agents, practices and discourses" (quoted in Goldberg, 2006). The multiplicity can be

viewed as a web of discourses. The web features discourses that interact with each other in order to legitimate or give meaning to other discourses that construe reality. According to Joshee & Johnson (2005) the web concept "highlights the significance of agency, in the form of space between the threads where individuals have some freedom to act in ways that support, extend, or undermine stated policy objectives and to introduce new ideas that may influence policy discourse" (p. 55). In order to construct the discursive web that acts as the site or domain where this analysis took place, I looked to the elements of dominant discourses, intertextuality, governmentality and ideology to help guide my analysis.

Dominant Discourse Hubs

There are dominant discourses that serve as a hub for many of the discourses in the web. According to Foucault (1972, as cited by Gale, 1999, p. 401), "dominant discourses do not just dominate textual meanings but are also strategically positioned in relation to the meanings assigned to texts by other discourses, ascribing them with legitimacy and illegitimacy while often concealing their own invention." Gale (1999) asserts that it is critical to examine the role of dominant discourses since they explain the details of policy formation in a particular moment in time. I used dominant discourses as major themes or nodes in my analysis.

Intertextuality

One way that the discursive web can be conceptually in the context of this framework is through intertextuality, which was explained earlier on in comparison to interdiscursivity. Intertextuality is a great way to examine how those discourses that exist in the web interact with one another. Fairclough (1992) looked at how texts are linked to their social context and how this influences interpretation to perform discourse analysis. For example, to identify intertextuality, the researcher should ask if the analyzed text references other texts. This level of analysis allows

the researcher to unearth the text producer's power relations. According to Fairclough (1992), intertextuality can become a site of contestation and struggle.

This study drew from Fairclough's notions of intertextuality, but goes a step further to show how discourses can shape the context that policies may emerge from (i.e. perceptions of Black youth, the economy, etc.). This brings us back to Gale (1999), who insists that context matters in the policy creation process. Similarly, Stephen Ball (1993) refers to an assemblage of policies that are tied together by context and discourse using the phrase 'policy ensembles'. Building further on the concept of the discursive web, Joshee and Johnson (2005) conceptualize the policy web to make the case further for intertextuality, noting that "few policies are made by individual actors or even single agencies, but are instead made by the interaction of many policies operating in a power network" (p. 52).

Governmentality

One of the central tenants of this study was derived from Foucault's (1980) argument that power is located in discourse, where "relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of discourse" (p. 93). Discourse has the power to conceal certain interests, such as the interests of elite groups. Concealing those interests may make them appear normal as a neoliberal logic (Dumas, 2016). Take for example the phenomenon of omitting the realities of Black Americans in labor policy, as described in Chapter 2 (Dumas, 2016). The omission itself may serve the interests of elites who benefit from marginalized labor in the lower wage job market (Harvey, 2007; Spence, 2012; Hall, 2013; Reed, 2013).

Governmentality explains the ways that discourse can operate as a controlling mechanism that protects the interests of certain groups. Governmentality stems from the word *govern*, which

means to “structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982, p.151). The acts of governing can be unconscious acts that perpetuate a set of rules designed under a system of power reified by certain discourses. In other words, people may perpetuate the status quo without realizing that they are participating in governing.

Discourses that are embedded in policy documents “operate to constitute, position, make productive, regulate, moralize and govern people” (Doherty, 2007, p. 195). Such texts are also permanently marked by hidden formulations of government, the role of governing, and its associated technologies. The activity of governing is understood as only becoming possible through the “development, harnessing, incorporation and active employment of discourse” (Doherty, 2007, p. 195).

Ideology

Ideology is considered ontologically discursive (Van Dijk, 2013; Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001). I agree and assert that neoliberalism as an ideology itself should be analyzed in its discursive aspect (Kjaer & Pederson, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007). For this reason, the discourse of neoliberalism was the object of this research.

Since the core tenet of this study was an examination of power and race in discourse, it would be shortsighted to not consider the role that ideology plays in shaping discourse. For example, Van Dijk (2013) argues that actors that insist that the only form of racism that exists is the overt speech and action is a prevailing ideology that perpetuates the denial of racism among elites and “presupposes a definition of racism that conveniently excludes them as part of the problem” (p. 8). Van Dijk (2013) defines ideology as follows:

> Social attitudes are themselves further organized by more fundamental social representations, namely ideologies. According to this rather specific use of the notion,

> ideologies feature the fundamental social principles and building blocks, such as norms and values, underlying the structures and formation of attitudes. That is, they represent the mental embodiment of the fundamental social, economic, and/or cultural goals and interests of a group. (p. 40)

Under Van Dijk's view, ideology can function as the instrument that organizes and enforces the rules of the game. Commonly held ideologies may operate an implicit or explicit level, but nonetheless operate to further constrain reality.

Research Question

Critical discourse analysts find that discourses are given legitimacy by certain ideologies, such as neoliberalism (Van Dijk, 1993; Ayers, 2005; Van Oort, 2015; Smith-Carrier & Lawlor, 2017). To achieve the purpose of the study, it was important to examine the role that neoliberal ideology, which is characterized as hegemonic, individualistic, and race-neutral, has in constructing opportunity youth and constituting the need for greater corporate involvement in the lives of youth (Baldridge, 2014; Smyth et al., 2014; Dumas, 2016). Additionally, numerous stakeholders are involved in workforce training efforts as a result of the public-private partnership mandate (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). This presents an opportunity for these actors to advance the neoliberal project or develop counter discourses. According to Hall (2013), "looking at the discursive strategies each contributor uses, we can see in greater detail how they establish a field of debate, contend with each other, and privilege particularly common-sense framings of an issue" (p. 17). To that end, my research question follows: *How are youth constructed by discourses in the opportunity youth initiative?*

Research Design Rationale

CDA emerged from the study of discourse and linguistics in the 1980s and 1990s as a form of discourse analysis that critically examines how language can legitimize social inequality/inequity, making it an appropriate analytical approach for study driven by neoliberalism (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Specifically, CDA explores how sites of information influence the ways we make meaning of the world, construct social identities, and develop social relationships (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

As I described in the explanation of my conceptual framework, discourse operates as a technology that shapes the social reality of individuals and CDA provides a clear roadmap for untangling how that technology works. CDA moves beyond just the rich description of texts and language and allows the researcher to analyze how power is operationalized in those texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Moreover, the way that power explicitly or implicitly operates through discourses was central to my framework, and CDA recognizes the significant role that discourse plays in transferring power from one group to another.

CDA also enables researchers to develop counter discourses that may destabilize existing hegemonic forces embedded in policy discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). This analysis goes beyond the critique of the current discourses and theorizes about potential possibilities for resistance. The study was a political project, and as Zora Neale Hurston (1942) put it, I am "poking and prying" with a purpose (p. 143). The goal of the analysis is to push back on dominant discourses that have material effects in public policy and the way Black youth are governed in their day-to-day lives. Others agree that structural changes can be made by shifting the discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Dumas, 2016; Zatz, 2020).

The Analysis

Fairclough (1992) writes that "an approach to policy analysis which incorporates critical analysis of policy discourse should focus upon generic features of policy discourse which appertain to the relationship between problems and solutions" (p. 11). Further, as Hyatt (2013) explains, "the value of taking a CDA-based orientation to policy analysis is that it offers an approach to the social analysis of discourse, particularly relevant to processes of social transformation and change" (p. 837).

I adapted a modified version of Hyatt's (2013) three-step guide to critical policy and discourse analysis that expands Fairclough's CDA model. The guide contains a set of questions that help "direct the examination of the policy context and lead to conclusions about the impact of policy discourse on reality" (p. 102). This analysis was conducted using those three steps.

Step 1: Contextualize the Policy as Discourse

The first step of this CDA was the analysis of the context in which the opportunity youth initiative is operating. This was conceived as the various ways that the goals of the policy are expressed. This context was identified through various means, including articles from the media and legislation. This step was important because it helped to establish the discursive web that served as the domain or field for the analysis. This step also included the identification of the policy creation community, or stakeholders. Moreover, I used the concept of warrant to understand why the opportunity youth initiative is justified (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Hyatt, 2013). Warrant can be divided into three different categories: *evidentiary warrant, accountability warrant, and political warrant*.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, rational approaches to policy development rely heavily on evidence derived from research to establish policy objectives. Establishing a position

based on evidence is an *evidentiary warrant*. However, as critical policy analysts understand, evidence is neutral (Cochran-Smith and Fries, 2001). Evidence is the presentation of a researcher's values, ideologies, and other subjectivities. Evidence also omits many elements that may influence policy goals. Additionally, evidence is used to establish trustworthiness of policy objectives, where evidence-based policy is viewed as more appealing and constructed as truth. These evidentiary warrants are often based on positivist research approaches that cast those who object to the evidence or resulting policy as discredited (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Hyatt, 2013).

The *accountability warrant* involves the evaluation of results or outcomes. However, this rational, neoliberal requirement of measuring the success of policy outcomes runs the risk of what Ball (2003) refers to as the 'terrors of performativity'. The accountability warrant gets reinforced by assumptions of the potential negative outcomes of an alternative policy approach (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Hyatt 2013).

The *political warrant* refers to the way in which a policy is justified discursively in terms of the public interest or public good (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Inglis 2004; Hyatt, 2013). This is rhetorically linked to the accountability warrant, but is usually couched in more general, evocative and positively evaluated terms such as the health of the state or national economy, for example (Hyatt, 2013).

Step 2: Critical Interpretation

The second step of the CDA was critical interpretation, in which I engaged the language in text and interpreted the construction of various themes with tools commonly used in CDA (Fairclough 1995). Fairclough (1993) asserts that language constructs and is constructed by society. Hyatt (2013) writes that "part of the role of language, therefore, involves the shaping of

knowledge, be that through maintaining existing positionalities or creating new ones" (p. 840). Below are Fairclough's (1993) basic assumptions of language in the analysis of discourse:

- Language is a social phenomenon;
- Individuals and institutions have specific meanings and values that are expressed in language in systematic ways;
- Texts serve as relevant units of language in communication; and
- Language users are not passive recipients in their relationship to texts.

Fairclough (1993) also argues that language acts as a tool of social control that conditions society to accept certain dominant discourses that may not even serve their best interests. These language practices are perceived as indisputable truth. This is similar to Dumas's (2016) view of the logics of neoliberalism and Hall's (2013) common sense neoliberalism. This CDA attempted to uncover hidden truths and ideologies, and problematizes what is commonly accepted to show that truths, logics, and common sense are discursively constructed and can be interpreted in various ways (McKenzie 1992; Hall, 2013; Hyatt, 2013).

One way that language was analyzed in this study was through the identification of modes of legitimation. According to Hyatt (2013), "legitimation is the process by which policies are justified to their audience by attachment to dominant norms and values, and so are closely linked with modes of warrant" (p. 849). For example, Fairclough (1992) identifies legitimation through narratives as a way that legitimation is discursively successful. This is also referred to as *mythopoesis*, or the use of "cautionary tales advising us as to the positive/negative outcomes of particular courses of action" (Hyatt, 2013, p. 840).

Language also establishes legitimacy through intertextuality or interdiscursivity. Through reference to other texts or discourses, documents construct shared or common-sense assumptions

about the world. The impact of intertextuality and interdiscursivity as the construction of meanings or truths also give legitimacy to the authors of the texts (Fairclough, 1992).

A conceptual metaphor, drawing on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is defined as "understanding one domain of experience (that is typically abstract) in terms of another (that is typically concrete)" (Semino & Demjina, 2019, p. 13). Conceptual metaphors are devices frequently used to discursively construct reality as well and was useful in critically interpreting the meaning of language used in the opportunity youth discursive web.

Policy discourses are also constructed through lexico-grammatical means such as the use of certain pronouns, tenses, and other semantic relationships. For example, pronouns can be used to "obscure the identity of the group constructed" or mark groups as "included or excluded (us and them)" (Hyatt, 2013, p. 842). Tense constructs certain truths as well. According to Hyatt (2013), "the role played by choices made in terms of tense and aspect is not merely one that elaborates the time frame of an action or process but one that also impacts on the representation of that action or process as true, relevant, or significant" (p. 842). For example, when stakeholders in the discursive web suggested in my analysis that the "future of the economy depends on a skilled workforce," the combined focus on the future and use of the present-perfect tense places relevance on the present moment, while minimizing the past events that may have contributed to the present moment (Hyatt, 2013).

Step 3: Broader Social Analysis

For the third step, I examined discourse as a form of social practice. Specifically, I explored how discourses in the opportunity youth discursive web constitute "ideologies and power placing it within a view of power as hegemony, and a view of the evolution of power relations as hegemonic struggle" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 86). In this step in the process, specific

details of policy and practice in the documents were used to theorize how current discourses may invite counter discourses and what implications there may be for actions or research that might seek to disrupt hegemonic forces. This step in the process was summarized mostly in the conclusion of this study.

Contextualization

Discourse in the opportunity youth initiative was the subject of my analysis. Opportunity youth are youth and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 and are out of school or not working. After the passage of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014, policymakers, philanthropists, corporations, and other stakeholders in Georgia at the state and local level were tasked with developing job training policies and initiatives that serve opportunity youth. Plans for implementing WIOA are developed first by the state's governor, and once approved the state requires local governments to develop their own plans. The plans are referred to as 'state WIOA plans' or 'local/regional WIOA plans.' Local stakeholders from the public and private sectors are engaged in the process of creating those plans, reflecting the public-private partnership mandate outlined in the policy itself (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014).

WIOA plans are required to provide extensive detail on how they plan to increase the employment outcomes of priority populations. These priority populations include veterans, individuals experiencing homelessness, individuals with low incomes, and opportunity youth (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Critically examining the WIOA policy and related documents for neoliberal discourses was important because the federal law requires that states and local areas spend a substantial share – 70 percent - of their funding allocation for youth on out-of-school youth (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). This

requirement was a condition that enabled Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative to grow and attract stakeholders from various sectors, including the corporate sector. The policy and subsequent programs became warranted by the *evidence* that Black youth were at a greater risk of disconnection from school and work (Robert, 2017.), accountability warrants arguing that public schools were failing these youth and facilitating the mass exit of youth from school without graduating (Belfield et al., 2012), and the political warrant that failing to do something about opportunity youth deprives the economy of a talented workforce (Roberts, 2017; Little, 2018).

Stakeholders

Following the passage of WIOA (2014), a new ensemble of elite policy actors and stakeholders was formed in Atlanta. The stakeholders that I referenced in the analysis of Atlanta's opportunity youth discursive web is limited to the following:

- **State of Georgia Office of Workforce Development.** The State's Office of Workforce Development is the major authority that governs and administers opportunity youth policies and programs across the state. The agency develops the state's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) plan that ultimately determines how local governments and their nonprofit partners that serve opportunity youth can operate and how much money they must spend. The agency plays a major fiduciary role in the administration of funding allocated each year to the Atlanta area.
- **Atlanta Workforce Development Agency**. WorkSource Atlanta, the city's public job training office, is the recipient of WIOA funds administered by the state. The job of the agency is to stand up programs that support the recruitment, training, and placement of opportunity youth in employment. The entity is also responsible for identifying

community-based organizations that have the capacity to train and employ opportunity youth as well.

- **Carl Vinson Institute.** The Carl Vinson Institute is housed at the University of Georgia. Research staff at the institute consult workforce organizations throughout the state on the development of opportunity youth policies and programs. They are responsible for providing much of the data used to inform state and local efforts and receive private funding in order to do so.
- **Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce**. The Metro Atlanta Chamber is the Atlanta region's premier business association. The chamber plays a substantial role in winning businesses on the idea of hiring young people. The organization also connects employers to the public workforce system where they can find individuals to fill roles outside of the traditional K-12 or higher education system.
- **United Way of Greater Atlanta**. The United Way of Greater Atlanta (UWGA) serves as a major convener of all the stakeholders involved in Atlanta's opportunity youth efforts. UWGA is a corporate philanthropy firm, who's major responsibility is to raise money from for-profit corporations to support programs that support youth employment. The agency also hosts public conversations about opportunity youth in an effort to educate business elites and the nonprofit community about the potential of training and hiring opportunity youth.
- **100K Opportunities Initiative.** The 100K Opportunities Initiative is a national effort that put a stake in the ground in Atlanta in 2018. The initiative is led by major global corporations, with the backing of private philanthropy to help get opportunity youth employed. The Initiative hosts major hiring fairs in host cities where opportunity youth

can get hired on the spot. The major businesses involved in the Atlanta effort include Starbucks, Taco Bell, Wal Mart, and the Schultz Family Foundation. The Initiative also reflects a public-private partnership between the City of Atlanta, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and the businesses that are attending the event to find workers.

- **Local media**. The media plays a significant role as the main conduit for information regarding opportunity youth getting consumed by the general public. The media provides commentary about opportunity youth from representatives of the organizations listed above.

I restricted my analysis to these stakeholders in the discursive policy web because they have been the most consistent actors in the opportunity youth field in Atlanta. It is also important to note that opportunity youth themselves were excluded from the ensemble. The purpose of this study was to understand how neoliberal discourses manifest in the opportunity youth initiative, which is not to say that opportunity youth themselves are not contributors to those discourses. Instead, I am reserving that analysis for future study.

Data

Documents and media were used to analyze the discourses advanced by these stakeholders in the opportunity youth discursive web. Beginning in October of 2018, I began collecting publicly available artifacts that have some reference to opportunity youth in Atlanta. The largest document and most central to the policy discussion were Georgia's WIOA State Plan and Metro Atlanta's Regional WIOA plan. Both documents, totaling over 400 pages when combined, reflect plans for implementing opportunity youth policies and programs allowed under federal law. The state plan establishes which flexibilities may be extended to Atlanta's plan, therefore preempting certain policies or activities. Throughout this time period, I also began

archiving news articles published by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC*). The AJC is Georgia's premier newspaper and features stories about workforce development in Georgia on a near-weekly basis. Press releases from private and government entities in Metro Atlanta that featured announcements about opportunity youth programs and policies were also collected. In 2019, a website was formed through a public-private partnership among the city government of Atlanta, the Metro Atlanta Chamber, and the 100K Opportunities Initiative. This website was also analyzed for relevant discourses. Visual media in the form of video was also analyzed for this study. After performing a search for "Opportunity Youth Atlanta" on Youtube.com, I discovered a filmed event hosted by the United Way of Greater Atlanta. The filmed event invited panelists to engage in a discussion with the President/CEO of United Way where they discussed why the organization was engaged in opportunity youth programming and policy discussions. The documents also included research pieces that provided an *evidentiary warrant* for the focus on opportunity youth in Metro Atlanta. For example, the Carl Vinson Institute was commissioned by United Way to research opportunity youth and develop a report with recommendations. The commissioned research report was also analyzed in this study.

While the collection of the documents/media began two years ago, the publish dates of some of them date back to 2017. In total, I ended up using only 18 artifacts for this CDA. Over time, I have sorted and stored these documents in a file folder on my laptop computer where they have been uploaded to Nvivo. Nvivo allows for the analysis of multiple forms of artifacts. The text documents were read line-by-line and an iterative coding procedure was used to identify certain words or phrases as *nodes*. These *nodes* were categorized as themes and selected based on their alignment with dominant themes discussed in the broader literature on neoliberalism, youth, race, and education. The Nvivo software also allowed me to archive links to YouTube

videos that were published by stakeholders in the discursive web. Nvivo includes a feature that allowed me to select clips of audio and visual footage and code those clips under the appropriate theme.

Several other artifacts are included in the analysis, and each are included in the table below:

Table 1: Documents and Media Cited in this Chapter

Document Title	Author/Stakeholder	In-text citation	File Type
100,000 Opportunities Initiative – Atlanta	100,000 Opportunities Initiative	(100,000 Opportunities Initiative, 2018)	YouTube video
Live United - Opportunity Youth	United Way of Greater Atlanta	(United Way of Greater Atlanta, 2017)	YouTube Video
Jobs Initiative Aimed at Youth People in Atlanta	Michael Kanell (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)	(Kanelle, 2018)	Online article
State of Georgia Four Year WIOA Unified State Plan	Governor's Office of Workforce Development	(Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020)	pdf
Opinion: Build Opportunities Here for Black Youth	Milton Little (United Way of Greater Atlanta)	(Little, 2020)	Online article
Atlanta's Future Talent Pipeline and Where We're Headed	Metro Atlanta Chamber	(Metro Atlanta Chamber, 2019a)	Online article
Metro Atlanta Regional Plan 2020-2023 Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act for the State of Georgia	Atlanta Regional Commission	(Atlanta Regional Commission, 2020)	Pdf
Creating a Skilled Workforce is Ongoing Challenge for Georgia Industries	Fran Putney	(Putney, 2019)	Online article
			Online article

Opportunity ATL Seeking to Fill More Than 1,200 Positions with Leading Atlanta Companies at Job Fair for Young Adults	Metro Atlanta Chamber	(Metro Atlanta Chamber, 2019b)	
YouthWorks is a Path Forward for Opportunity Youth	YouthWorks (United Way of Greater Atlanta)	(YouthWorks, 2019)	Online article
Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms Announces City of Atlanta's	Michael Smith (City of Atlanta)	(Smith, 2018)	Online article
About Us	100,000 Opportunities Initiative	(100,000 Opportunities Initiative, n.d.)	Website
Opportunity ATL Seeking to Fill More Than 1,300 Positions with Leading Atlanta Companies at Virtual Job Fairs for Young Adults	Metro Atlanta Chamber	(Metro Atlanta Chamber, 2020)	Online article
Disconnected Youth in Georgia: Urban Counties Exhibit Higher Counts, Rural Counties Reveal Even Higher Rates	Jeffrey Robert (Carl Vinson Institute)	(Robert, 2017)	Pdf
General Thoughts Memo	Alex Camardelle	(Camardelle, 2020)	Nvivo
Summer Youth Internship Program	Fulton County Government	Fulton County Government	Website
Georgia Employability Skills Task Force Recommendations	Georgia Department of Education	(Georgia Department of Education, 2017)	Pdf
America's Leading Employers and Foundations to Host Atlanta's Largest Job Fair for Youth on May 3	Sarah Elison	(Elison, 2018)	Online article

Interpretation

The results of the interpretation are the heart of Chapter 4 and entails the examination of modes of legitimation, lexico-grammatical devices, and other elements to deconstruct the

dominant discourses that were unearthed in the close-reading of the documents. Additionally, attention was given to what was missing in the text. For example, in the analysis I illustrated how the lack of explicit language or terms that call attention to racism in the labor market is perpetuated by neoliberal ideologies that privilege personal responsibility/individualism as truth over systemic failures of the economy and public policy (Hall, 2013; Dumas, 2016).

This deconstruction and close reading of the text was made possible using Nvivo. I performed a multistep, line-by-line coding process, coding first the elements in the text that I believed corresponded with the dominant discourses that exist in the opportunity youth discursive web. Those dominant discourses were derived from an extensive review of literature in Chapter 2 regarding youth in neoliberal contexts that illuminated the ways that youth are pathologized in discourse. Initially, three dominant discourses were labeled as 'nodes' in Nvivo: 'helpless youth', 'economic waste', and 'youth crime complex.' For example, the youth crime complex discourse suggested that summer employment and training is key for solving the crime problem and justified by evidentiary warrants that suggest summer jobs are empirically linked to lower rates of crime in Black neighborhoods. This discourse may construct a Black youth identity as criminal or delinquent and attempts to legitimize 'job training' that may lead to low wages, poor worker protections, etc. as a solution for solving the youth crime problem – an extension of the shadow carceral state (Zatz, 2020). The identification of the youth crime complex dominant discourse in the literature review proved helpful, as the same elements of this discourse appeared throughout my analysis. For instance, the research recommendation from the Carl Vinson Institute analyzed in this study used statistics to legitimize discourses about opportunity youth that are unemployed having higher risks of criminality, citing that opportunity

youth are “500% more likely to have a criminal record compared to non-disconnected youth” (Robert, 2017, p. 10).

In my careful, line-by-line reading of the documents and from listening to the media, a fourth dominant discourse emerged that I did not identify at the start of the analysis, and that was the prioritization of business needs. I was open to adding this dominant discourse as I was openly coding in a format like that used in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory, which was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is an inductive method of analysis aimed at developing new theories. The process is an extensive, iterative, and emergent one in which analytic codes help the researcher identify new phenomena in the data. However, unlike Glaser & Strauss’s belief that discovering theory that is emergent from data is separate from the observer, Charmaz (2006) argues that “we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). A similar approach was deployed by Shin and Ging (2019) who recently used CDA for a study that analyzed discourses within the WIOA policy itself. Their thematic analysis found that the themes in WIOA and supplemental memoranda “tactically legitimize and promote the U.S.’ aspiration to rebrand itself as a democratic, hypercapitalist society—by hovering between the discourse of opportunity and the discourse of neoliberalism” (p. 13).

During the second pass of coding words, phrases, and images, I ended up with four major dominant discourses labeled as ‘nodes’:

- Prioritizing Business Needs
- Youth as an Economic Burden
- Helpless Youth

- Youth Crime Complex

Within each of these dominant discourses, numerous sub-categories, or sub-themes, were identified that added to the complexity of the discursive web. Sub-themes resulted in the easier identification of interdiscursivity across the four dominant discourses. Sub-themes were coded using line-by-line coding as well and was a reflexive process that also mirrored that used in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). For example, when coding text under the dominant discourse of 'prioritizing business needs,' I identified a 'workforce shortage crisis' theme. This theme was persistent and frequently framed in terms of the disaster-level impact that lacking a skilled workforce could have on profits, productivity, and state and local economies. There were a number of phrases in the documents that used the literal term *crisis*, so those were all coded under the *workforce shortage crisis* sub-theme which was organized under the *prioritizing business needs* dominant discourse. These sub-themes were emergent in the reading of the analysis, resulting in 24 sub-themes. Through the deconstruction process, I combined some sub-themes and eliminated others that were duplicative. At the end of the coding process, I narrowed my analysis to 10 sub-themes.

Broader Social Analysis

The final step in this CDA called for a broader social analysis. This step drew from Janks (2005), who argued that discourse analysts need to move beyond deconstruction and into transforming systems. The concluding chapter summarizes some of the flaws inherent in the dominant discourses influencing job training policies and initiatives that are designed for opportunity youth. Any counter-discourses identified in this study help challenge the dominant narratives that construct Black youth identity through job training policies and programs. The interdiscursive nature of the discursive web provides a domain to examine how various discourses support a dominant discourse. Counter-discourses can break the links between

multiple discourses or mute them altogether to offer agency to Black youth in Atlanta's opportunity youth field. We must understand how discourses interact with each other for reality to be contested (Goldberg, 2006; Fairclough, 2006).

Interdiscursiveness is key here. The interconnectedness between discourse exposes how policy outcomes are influenced by ideology, which is present in the text. For instance, throughout the policy documents and media analyzed in this study a pattern of word use was formed related to the issue of *soft skills*. The repeated use of the *soft skills* phrase across multiple artifacts established interdiscursivity and revealed a shared concept used to form common sense among the actors within the opportunity youth discursive web. The researcher also identifies what is muted in the relationships between text, thus offering counter discourses that reveal what is left unsaid. In the concluding chapter, I demonstrated how neoliberal ideology leverages multiple discourses as a technology of governmentality that can create a power imbalance, primarily through the race-neutral nature of neoliberalism. Hode and Meisenbach (2017) write the following:

> In fact, Fairclough (2010) argued that these concepts are more aptly considered together as an "ideological– discursive" formation that maintains dominance through economic and political power. Ideology, as a function of power, serves to naturalize and reify the social order by representing dominant interests as universal, denying or obscuring contradictions, and controlling actions through active consent (Giddens, 1984). In other words, ideological assumptions are (re)produced through discourse and serve to create a particular representation of "reality" that is a taken-for-granted norm and body of knowledge. (p. 8)

Researcher Role & Ethics

Simon (2011) suggests that the human researcher is a research instrument, and he or she is actively engaged in mediating data, interpreting, and even producing data. Additionally, Bowen (2009) states that "the researcher/analyst relies on skills as well as intuition and filters data through an interpretive lens" (p. 36). In order to successfully consider the humanness of the researcher, it is important to reveal his or her subjectivities by revealing their qualifications to conduct the research, assumptions, and potential biases that may limit the findings of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Simon, 2011).

I was closely related to the data collected for this study; therefore, I acknowledge my role as a past funder of opportunity youth training programs. I formerly worked for the Annie E. Casey Foundation as a Program Assistant, and in that role, I was involved in opportunity youth programs. As a philanthropic professional who administered private grants to nonprofit programs, I am aware of their internal functions, including the ways they evaluate their programs for requests to become government contract agencies that receive WIOA funding to implement training for opportunity youth. I assumed that the ethical concerns and inherent power dynamic of the funder/grantee relationship was eliminated since I no longer serve in that capacity. I have no decision-making authority regarding funding decisions for job training nonprofits that serve opportunity youth. Further, the artifacts analyzed in this study did not come from organizations that I worked with in my former career role. Instead, the artifacts reflect the views of key organizations that are involved in the latest iteration of Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative but do not provide direct services in the form of job training.

As I mentioned in the opening chapter, my subjectivity as a Black cis-gender male and direct experience with helping my brother in his own journey has pushed me to consider the

ways that Black youth have historically experienced harm in the research process. My concern for harm in the research process is largely informed by the works of Boog (2003), hooks (2000), and Collins (1991) who argue that post-structural research centers the voices of oppressed individuals through different forms of qualitative inquiry. This orientation as a researcher constitutes the critical discourse analysis that was deployed in this study.

Conclusion: Limitations, Delimitations, Potential Impact & Significance

Limitations

There are numerous limitations to consider when reading this study. For instance, the purpose of this study was not to produce generalizable results. The analysis of the discourses in the Atlanta opportunity youth scene may vary greatly depending on where initiatives operate geographically, the actors involved in the creation of policies and programs, and other factors. Therefore, the findings of this critical discourse analysis are limited to the Atlanta opportunity youth scene. Additionally, this analysis should be bolstered by the inclusion of perspectives from opportunity youth themselves in follow-up work who can provide expert knowledge regarding the material effects of neoliberal discourses on their lives. The original research plan included interviews with opportunity youth. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put a hold on the interview plans. Out of concern for the public health and economic impact that the pandemic created in Atlanta, I did not include direct accounts from opportunity youth. Another limitation is that the label *opportunity youth* is not exclusively used to describe youth who are out of school or out of work, but I restricted my analysis to documents that mention opportunity youth or disconnected youth. It is possible that I overlooked policy documents or other media that contain information relevant to Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. This analysis also risked reinforcing the stigma of labels commonly associated with youth (Baldridge, 2014; Dumas,

2016). However, I recognize that opportunity youth are not a monolith and should not be perceived as such. In fact, the analysis that follows revealed that the term *opportunity* may discursively mask the many challenges facing youth. To that end, the final chapter offers an alternate consideration for the categorization of youth.

Delimitation

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, an important delimitation to note for this study is that I narrowed my analytical view to discourses that may address race and class. I was specifically concerned with Black youth in this study. My purpose for conducting this study follows that of Dumas (2016), who writes that "it is the development of blackness that most heavily informs racial neoliberal logics" (p. 97). I also conducted this study with poor Black youth in mind because "although poor and working-class whites may suffer economic inequities, their subordinate class position is not compounded by race; they possess whiteness as a form of property, which bestows protections and benefits, even if mediated by class position" (Buras, 2014, p. 61). Additionally, Black Americans have historically been the target of policies that exacerbate the racial divide along economic lines since slavery, and even a (de)racialized welfare-to-work policy in this current, neoliberal political economy is making it difficult to reverse those divisions (Quadagno, 1994).

Potential Impact/Significance

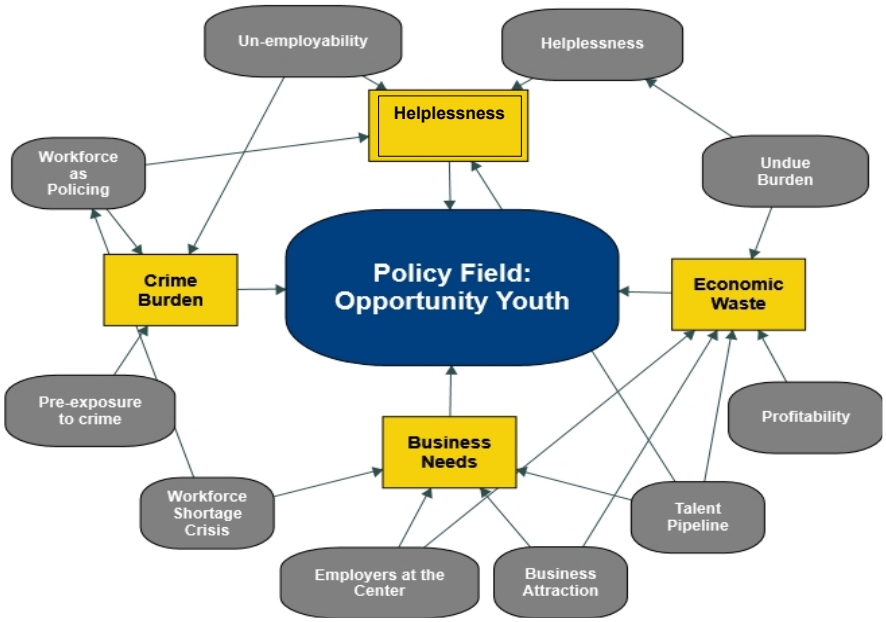
Very few studies have examined the way that neoliberal discourses manifest in opportunity youth initiatives in the era of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014). This study deployed a CDA to present recommendations for the job training policy and practice field that supports a framework for engaging opportunity youth in ways that reject hegemony. Findings from this study have the potential to inform the development of future state plans and

local opportunity youth efforts. To date, there are few, if any, conceptual models or frameworks that detail what Black youth need to be successful in the opportunity youth initiative. Findings from this study will be useful for helping stakeholders in the field identify processes of neoliberalism and the pervasiveness of race neutrality in public policy. Further, the analysis may help policymakers develop job training policies and programs that address structural racism, help youth build power, and confront the neoliberal project working against them.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

This chapter presents the analysis and results from the CDA method that I described in the previous chapter. Based on a review of the literature and reading the artifacts in this study, I identified four dominant neoliberal discourses as themes that exist within Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative: prioritizing business needs, crime burden, economic waste, and helpless youth. This chapter explores all four of these dominant discourses, their associated sub-themes and their contributions to the construction of Black youth in job training policy. This chapter does not include every detail of the discourse interactions within the entire opportunity youth discursive web. Due to space and time limitations, I am outlining key sub-themes and their influences to help understand how these discourses operate to legitimize or constrain other discourses. In combination, these discourses and subthemes form the discursive web below:

Figure 1: Opportunity Youth Discursive Web



Dominant Discourse #1: Prioritizing Business Needs

Within the opportunity youth initiative, business needs emerge as a significant concern. Georgia's WIOA state plan sets the tone for all other entities engaged in opportunity youth policies and programs in the state:

> As global corporations continue to *choose Georgia* to plant their next operation, and as homegrown companies expand, thousands of jobs are being created each year. This rapid job growth means we must take every measure to leverage our workforce development efforts in order to ensure that Georgia *businesses have a strong and reliable workforce*. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. v, italics added)

The above quote is from the opening of the state plan, which is a cover letter penned by Republican Governor Brian Kemp. Georgia's ranking as a strong business state guides the plan's priorities. Atlanta is situated in Georgia, which has historically been a conservative state. Georgia's legacy of conservative leadership at the state level has set the tone for how the city is expected to develop its own plan which is just one of multiple ways the state restricts local government policies. For instance, Georgia law prohibits the City of Atlanta from raising its minimum wage, despite Atlanta being ranked number one for income inequality (Huizar and Lathrop, 2019). Still, Atlanta serves as the economic hub of the state, as it has the largest residential population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), it is Georgia's capital, and it is home to the busiest airport in the world (Mumm, 2020). Further, Atlanta is responsible for most of Georgia's economic growth described in the governor's passage (Knox, 2019).

The emphasis on job creation is intentional, and the policy document appears to serve as promotional content that can be used for courting businesses to the state. The governor affirms that "thousands of jobs are being created each year," an assertion that suggests robust economic

activity in the state (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. v). Georgia's governor deployed neoliberal logic to set the tone of the state's workforce development strategy, by insisting that as businesses expand in Georgia, they must "have a strong and reliable workforce" (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. v). There is no mention of what benefits and rewards will be received by jobseekers within this section of the plan. As this analysis shows, there is no attention given to the question of how the plan's benefits will be distributed to the unemployed in a manner that increases their prosperity.

Workforce Shortage Crisis

One of the logics of neoliberalism presented in the state plan is the matter of crisis. Crisis is commonly used to incite action and warrant change in neoliberal contexts (Saull, 2013). As Milton Friedman (1962) stated, "only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change" (p. ix). One of the justifications for enacting job training policies and programs is the issue of job growth exceeding the number of workers available (Orfield &Ashkinaze, 1993; Lafer, 2002; Spring, 2015). The justification represents one of the contradictions within this *business needs* dominant discourse. For instance, earlier I showed how the governor was courting businesses by indicating in the state plan that Georgia is adding "thousands of jobs each year" and experiencing "rapid job growth" to meet the needs of businesses (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. v). However, other stakeholders within the discursive web suggest that there is a workforce shortage – there are not enough workers.

Crisis narratives can produce significant social and economic change (Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013). For example, global elites have manufactured educational crises and formulated solutions that rely heavily on market-oriented interventions in education, health care, housing, and employment (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013). Through these

processes, public commodities are deemed bad, while privatization becomes a more viable option for addressing educational crises. Crises are manufactured through narratives of "alienation, dissatisfaction, and depression" (Apple, 2006, p. 17). The corporate-run 100,000 Opportunities Initiative that operates in Atlanta agrees with government voices regarding the crisis by asserting the following: "We are in the midst of a national crisis. How much do we have to gain locally, and globally, by investing in these young people?" (100,000 Opportunities Initiative, 2018, 01:20). The interdiscursive repetition of the crisis narrative across multiple stakeholders constructs this crisis as common sense (Hall, 2013).

The workforce shortage crisis discourse laid the foundation for policy action in the opportunity youth initiative. All the stakeholders in this study use the workforce shortage crisis discourse as justification for greater business involvement in the lives of opportunity youth. The workforce shortage discourse also promotes opportunity youth as a commodity whose purpose is to serve the economic interests of businesses. It also provides political warrant to the idea that the workforce shortage problem is due to a perceived lack of work ethic and personal responsibility:

> Much of what makes Atlanta great is the result of public officials and business leaders working together on urgent public matters. Today, business growth in our city is stifled *because of the shortage of qualified workers*. (Little, 2020, para. 4, italics added)

The above passage is an example of how the *workforce shortage* discourse contradicts itself. The author in this opinion piece in the AJC argues that a "shortage of qualified workers" (Little, 2020, para. 4) has stifled business growth, but businesses in Atlanta have somehow managed to thrive over time, experiencing one of the largest growth rates in the nation (Knox, 2019). Placing the responsibility of the so-called *workforce shortage* on individuals distracts

from the policy environment that enables businesses to import workers from outside of Atlanta and prioritize the hiring of individuals connected to elite networks (Williams, 2015; Fernandez and Greenberg, 2016). The data reveals that business activity is growing, at least enough for Georgia to be named as the number one state to do business for seven years in a row by Area Development Magazine (Knox, 2019; Kaelble, 2019). The author of the quote above is the President and CEO of the United Way of Greater Atlanta, a corporate-philanthropic entity integral to the formulation of the opportunity youth initiative in the Atlanta region.

The repetition of the *workforce shortage* theme from multiple voices, particularly those who are in positions of leadership and power, suggests that the shortage is a truth. Consequently, it becomes common sense (Hall, 2013). The state and local context of globalization and the neoliberal ideology behind it facilitates an environment where a *workforce shortage* discourse can emerge as indisputable. The *workforce shortage* discourse is articulated through mainstream organizations, media, and policymakers, and is bought into – and advanced – by all stakeholders involved in the discursive web (Hall, 2013).

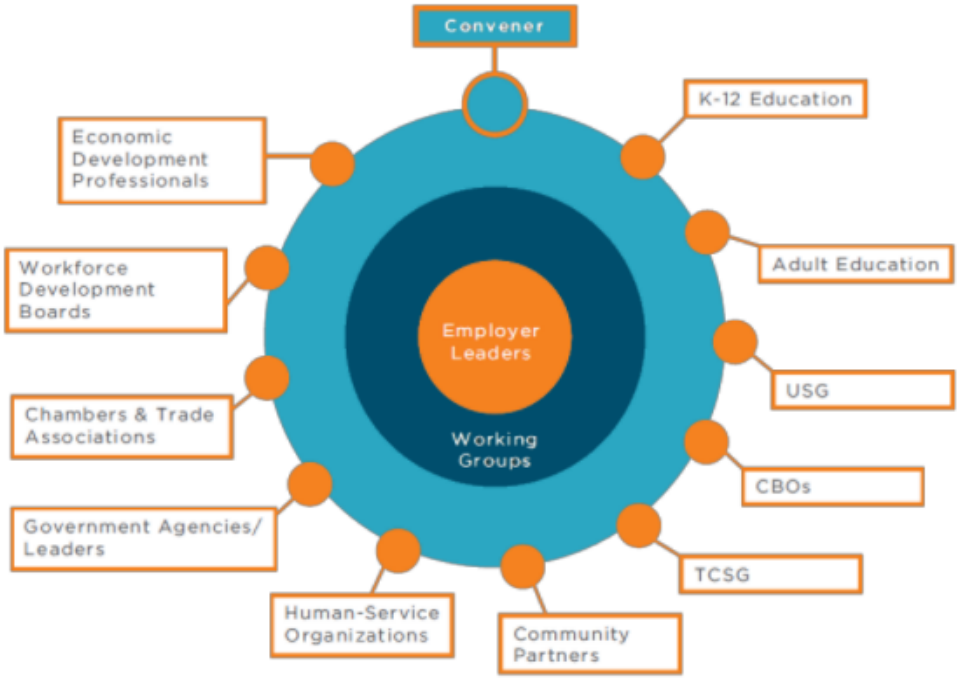
Employers at the Center

Contained in the state's WIOA plan, there is a visual (Figure 4) that places employers at the heart of the plan. This visual implies that employers are at the center of the state's job training strategy and policy, which means they must be at the center of opportunity youth policy objectives. The state plan notes that "without this structure in place [employers at the center], it will prove impossible for the sector partnerships to adequately build out the envisioned work and keep it moving forward." (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 46)

Youth are not central in the state strategy figure. The exclusion of youth voices and the prioritization of business needs, both metaphorically and literally in the text, illustrates the

commitment to focus more on the general welfare of businesses and not the young people turn to job training services. Additionally, as one can read in the quote, the state implies that strategies cannot be successful without the employer or business at the center. In fact, the word "impossible*"* is used, suggesting that this another indisputable truth (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 46). The voices represented within the document insist that there are no other possible strategies, delegitimizing alternative approaches that might prioritize the needs of opportunity youth over the concerns of businesses.

Figure 2: State Steering Committee Strategy for the Implementation of the WIOA plan (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 46)



Throughout the analysis, I used the terms businesses and employers interchangeably. In the field of job training, both terms are used to refer to businesses that employ people. The deference to employers is significant in the opportunity youth discursive web, reflecting a major feature of neoliberal ideology (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Hall, 2013; Spring, 2015).

Metaphorically, businesses are given a menu of items to choose from if they choose to relocate or expand in Georgia and the plan articulates that human capital and billions of dollars in tax credits are at the top of the menu (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020).

The state is also joined by the business community in noting the dangers of excluding employers from the formation of opportunity youth initiatives. For instance, the Metro Atlanta Chamber, the Atlanta region's leading association of businesses, argues that "*engaging employers in education is critical to closing the skills gap* and fostering economic inclusion by attracting students and jobseekers into the workforce by increasing interest in high demand fields utilizing student aptitudes to target work-based learning opportunities in these fields" (Metro Atlanta Chamber, 2019a, para. 1, italics added).

Throughout the discourse analysis, I found it was important to highlight the frequent use of the word "employer" in lists, where "employer" is the first stakeholder noted, not youth or any jobseeker. This construct plays a role in signifying priority to employers as the key stakeholders for opportunity efforts:

- "This work has informed Georgia's strategies for developing career pathways as these strategic partnerships are comprised of *employers*, education and training providers at all levels, workforce development representatives, and community-based organizations in key industries and occupational sectors" (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 56, italics added).
- "A national movement of *employers*, foundations, and community organizations, we're committed to reinventing our hiring, retention, and advancement practices, to hire and train opportunity youth" (100K opportunities Initiative, 2018, 00:30, italics added).

- "It will do this by building out a robust program of connection and engagement for *employers*, community-based organizations, the public sector and Opportunity Youth" (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2020, p. 43, italics added).
- "When you talk to *employers***,** economic developers and chamber executives, talent is the top thing on their mind right now" (Putney, 2019, para. 2, italics added).

In the above examples, the word employer is italicized to indicate that the word comes first in all attempts to list stakeholders across multiple documents. The emphasis on the employer is redundant, but here it illustrates the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of prioritizing business needs across multiple documents and voices, rendering youth invisible.

The War for Talent

The talent pipeline sub-theme appears repeatedly throughout the discursive web as well. Talent is viewed as something in the opportunity youth discursive web that can be developed and nurtured. However, talent might be innate and natural among people (Collings & Mellahi, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo & Dries, 2013; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Paauwe, 2020). In the view that talent is innate in this neoliberal context, it is assumed that all young people have natural born talent to work in specific industries. By reducing a person's talents to work in specific industries, employers, policymakers, and other stakeholders promote the exploitation of youth in exchange for corporate profits and other human capital gains (Massey, 2013; Gill-Peterson, 2015; Turner, 2014; Dumas, 2016; Selman, 2019).

In *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*, Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004) describe the implications of focusing on knowledge-based talent and the issue of employability in the labor market. Their research, while primarily

conducted in the United Kingdom, aligns with some of the discursive practices regarding talent that were identified in the Atlanta opportunity youth initiative. In the view of Brown et al. (2004), there is a "war for talent" (p. 670) in which there is a limited pool of talent capable of joining the professional class, which creates competition among corporations to recruit the best and most skilled job candidates. Talent is also understood as a limited commodity that organizations must compete for (Brown et al., 2004). The authors challenge common logics of employability that suggest that economic mobility is achieved through high-skilled and high wage jobs. Instead, they argue that this common view of talent and employability ignores the reality of structural barriers that reinforce inequalities in education (Brown et al., 2004). Within the opportunity youth initiative, these features of the *war for talent* discourse appear often.

The term talent is used to describe individuals who are jobseekers, or in the context of this study, human capital. Talent is typically referred to by stakeholders as an untapped resource for employers that needs to be developed and harnessed to improve business productivity. For example, the Metro Atlanta Chamber explains "this group of motivated *young talent***,** also interpreted as opportunity youth, are a vital and *untapped resource* looking to fill millions of open roles – and with Atlanta's continued record job growth – their services are in high demand" (Metro Atlanta Chamber, 2019b, para. 2, italics added).

The link between the nonprofit community and the business community becomes clear here as well. For instance, the following mission statement from YouthWorks, a nonprofit initiative that is managed by the United Way of Greater Atlanta, shares the concern about *untapped* or *depleted* talent with the business community: "It has been the mission of YouthWorks, then, to combat this *depletion of qualified youth, in order to enhance productivity*

in local businesses, and set youth and young adults up for success, in all of their future career endeavors" (YouthWorks, 2019, para. 3, italics added).

The notion that opportunity youth, unless employed, are wasted or depleted talent furthers the notion that not only will job training initiatives fail without employers at the center of their strategy, but also that businesses might fail without employing these young people in order to "enhance productivity" (YouthWorks, 2019, para. 3). This notion of *depleted* talent places burden on opportunity youth but invites corporations to intervene. For example, the below quote from a corporate executive of Starbucks, the leading corporate funder of the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, repeats the concept of *unlocking* talent:

> Through the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, *Starbucks has found a unique way to unlock the talent and potential* of these young people for retail and customer service roles in thousands of our stores across the country. The next Opportunity Fair in Atlanta is going to be a powerful moment for our nation's top employers to come together with local leaders and demonstrate that *we stand ready to hire young Americans who are looking for a chance to dream big and reach their aspirations*. (Elison, 2018, para. 3, italics added)

These discourses, with the support of elite stakeholders in the discursive web, invited the Atlanta 100K Opportunities Initiative into the Atlanta region. This initiative involves all the stakeholders described in this study and other corporations not discussed in this study, including Chick-Fil-A, and United Parcel Services (UPS) which are both headquartered in Atlanta. The 100K Opportunities Initiative is a periodic job fair, but the core audience for the fair is opportunity youth. When the 100K Opportunities Initiative first launched in Atlanta in 2018, it was represented as a true public-private partnership. The 100K Opportunities initiative is funded by

the Schultz Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization whose mission is to "unlock America's potential, one individual and one community at a time" (Schultz Family Foundation, n.d.). The foundation is founded and run by Sheri Schultz, the wife of the Starbucks CEO and former presidential candidate Howard Schultz, who argued that "there is nothing more powerful than helping a young person land a job" (Schultz, n.d., para. 4). The Schultz family provides funding to the Aspen Institute to manage the initiative. The Aspen Institute is involved in the proliferation of policies and programs that advance a neoliberal economic agenda, particularly the realm of school choice (Baltodano, 2017; Brash, 2018).

The 100K Opportunities Initiative illustrates how corporate philanthropists are playing a substantial role in Atlanta's opportunity youth scene. The pathologization of youth combined with the *prioritization of business needs* created an environment for the 100K Opportunities initiative to expand to the Atlanta region in partnership with the City of Atlanta, the Metro Atlanta Chamber, and several corporations. Data on youth unemployment and educational outcomes was used to make the case for the expansion, including studies like those provided by the Carl Vinson Institute. The City of Atlanta became a formal partner for the initiative, although it has not invested any public dollars to support the hiring fairs:

> More than 16% of youth in Atlanta ages 16-24 are out of school and not working. The Opportunity Fair is a job and resource fair for these youth. *This event galvanizes the public, private, and philanthropic communities to come together to connect opportunity youth to employment opportunities*. The Opportunity Fair is the start of a long-term commitment and engagement by the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative in Atlanta. (Smith, 2018, para. 3, italics added)

The Opportunity Fair represents part of the neoliberal undoing of the public responsibility to address systemic barriers that may prevent individuals, particularly Black youth, from accessing economic security. Institutions and spokespeople that contribute to the neoliberal discourse of public-private partnership contribute to the increase of corporate actors in the lives and education of youth and young adults (Cooney, Nyssens, and O'Shaughnessy, 2018; Loxley and Hajer, 2019; Khadaroo and Abdullah, 2019). Public-private partnerships extend neoliberalism into the lives of opportunity youth, where the education opportunities that remain for these young people through job training initiatives are controlled by private actors.

The concept of a business unlocking the talent and potential of young people by offering a job in retail or customer service illustrates the faith policymakers have in corporations to improve economic and educational opportunities for youth. However, the forces that disproportionately subjugate Black youth along lines of race and class in employment remain muted in the discourse. This talent discourse reifies the idea that talent and potential are innate characteristics, but can only be accessed through employment. This limited view of talent also assumes talent cannot be used in other ways outside of work. One must ask: how do stakeholders know how young people are deploying their talent?

Those who do not engage in work are considered a drain on the system in terms of their perceived dependence on public assistance, which I discuss later in this chapter. This discourse extends from the evolution of welfare-to-work policies and discourse in the United States, where work is viewed as the characteristic that gives people their citizenship and humanity (Massey, 2013). In *Vocabularies of the Economy*, Massey (2013) critiques the neoliberal logic that reduces talent or work to merely wage labor:

> Where only transactions for money are recognized as belonging to 'the economy', the vast amount of unpaid labor – as conducted for instance in families and local areas – goes uncounted… This is a question of recognition, of the way we think of the economy as a part of society, and of valuing what it takes for a society to be reproduced. (p. 10)

Labor as a condition for one's humanity is connected to a long history of racist attitudes in United States welfare-to-work policies and debates about what constitutes acceptable labor (David, 2007). Since enslavement, the work ethic of Black people has been called into question repeatedly in policy debates, resulting in work requirements that lead to jobs that might reproduce economic disadvantage (Bourdeaux & Pandey, 2017; Minoff, 2020). As the enduring culture of dependency myths were advanced by business leaders, popular media, academics and politicians through the twentieth century, policymakers placed unmatched value on wage labor. Under neoliberalism, it is assumed that working hard and finding employment yields greater rewards than for those who are unemployed. However, the benefits of employment and hard work are not distributed equitably. For instance in education, even with equal educational credentials, people of color hold significantly less wealth than white people. Nationwide, a household headed by a white person with a high school diploma holds about twice as much wealth as a household headed by a Black or Latinx person with a four-year college degree (Asante-Muhammad, Collins, Hoxie, & Nieves, 2017). Racial attitudes shape perceptions of work ethic or talent. The tendency to punish those along lines of race and ethnicity who are not meeting work standards also extends from welfare-to-work policy, where states with larger Black populations have more punitive policy rules as a condition for receiving public assistance (Davis, 2007).

The term talent in the job training field emerges from the human resources/human capital field, particularly in the hiring discourse (Tansley, 2011). The concern about talent is linked to the neoliberal competitiveness discourses, where employers are competing for the top talent to fill jobs (Brown et al., 2004; Harvey, 2007; Collings & Mellahi, 2013; Spring, 2015). In the neoliberal view, it is essential for businesses to have a workforce ready to compete on a local, state and global level to shore up profits and maintain competitive advantage. This concern is echoed by YouthWorks in the passage below:

> The rate of youth unemployment is the highest it has ever been since WWII, leaving our youth and our society at a disadvantage, on account of the loss of *talent*…Moreover, *without a vigorous talent pipeline, businesses run the risk* of continually struggling to fill necessary positions, which can have detrimental effects now, and well into the future. (YouthWorks, 2019, para. 3, italics added)

Youth are represented in the discourse as human capital and a talented workforce is assumed to stimulate the economy, yielding a greater return for all the actors who have made investments in privatization. Corporate involvement in job training is considered self-serving (Ayers & Carlone, 2007). In other words, corporations' self-interests are served by the need to compete in a global economy or maintain a hegemonic power structure by "skilling" youth. Focusing on employer needs, Belfield et al. (2012) argues "employers look for a smooth trajectory of activity and progress for their future workers, a process by which the young continually acquire workplace skills and acclimate to the demands of the workplace" (p. 4). Youth that do not follow this "trajectory" (Belfield et al., 2012, p. 4) become scarred and unable to compete with others for employment later in life.

Talent is also assigned economic value, which is represented in the discursive web in terms of government savings in the following way: "In terms of lost revenues and increased social services, it is estimated that the country would save *$93 billion annually* if it [the country] connected these talented young people to careers" (100,000 Opportunities Initiative, n.d., para 4). This is interdiscursively linked to the economic waste dominant discourse, which I address later in this chapter.

Business Attraction, Economic Growth

The state's job training policies have aided Georgia in becoming ranked the number one state in the nation in which to do business by several leading business and economic development publications (Georgia Department of Economic Development, 2020). WIOA policies work in concert with other economic development policies that attempt to attract new businesses to Georgia for the purpose of job creation, for instance tax policy:

> Through *limited regulation and taxation*, low cost of living, a strong workforce, and high quality of life, Georgia has established a *strong business climate that is attracting jobs and investment*. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 1, italics added).

Georgia is a low tax state, and it has achieved this distinction at the expense of Black and Latinx communities (Leachman, Mitchell, Johnson, and Williams, 2018). The conservative economic value of low taxation has cemented inequities (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Leachman et al., 2018). Corporate and individual income taxes generate revenues that finance public services that everyone utilizes, not just those with low incomes. As a result of the conservative approach to taxation, Georgia spends less per person today on state services than it did before the Great Recession (Kanso, 2019). Budget cuts to vital services such as K-12 education, human services

and the public job training system have weakened educational and economic opportunities in the state. Georgia's conservative policymakers give away more than $9 billion in corporate tax subsidies with little-to-no accountability that could be used to fund schools and supportive services for families in poverty (Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, 2020).

Economic growth concerns are a common feature of neoliberal discourse (Massey, 2013; Hall, 2013). Within the opportunity youth discursive web, it is not clear how the goals of economic growth will benefit opportunity youth. Instead, the benefits of economic growth are appear to be reserved for corporations, which is concerning. Economic growth has "in its crudest formulation, entailed providing the conditions for the market sector to produce growth and to accept that this would result in inequality (though it should also be noted that different models of growth produce different degrees of inequality)" (Massey, 2013, p. 7). There are no discursive elements that suggest the role of economic growth is to enable the redistribution of resources in a manner that repairs the inequality resulting from its production (Massey, 2013; Tillman, 2019).

It is ironic that businesses and politicians express concerns in the opportunity youth discursive web about the inability to find workers, yet they depend on tax cuts that prohibit redistributive policy solutions that could promote better educational, health, and financial opportunities. There is tension and irony between the crisis discourse of a workforce shortage and the business attraction discourse. There is hypocrisy in expressing concern about the lack of talent while corporate-backed legislators simultaneously pass policies that keep taxes so low that public K-12 and higher education programs remain underfunded (Owens, 2021).

Dominant Discourse #2: Economic Waste

This section explores the dominant discourse of *economic waste* in the opportunity youth discursive web. The *economic waste* discourse was particularly prominent throughout the

documents and media that were analyzed for this study. Through the *economic waste* discourse, opportunity youth – the majority of whom are Black youth in Atlanta (Lewis, 2020) – are reduced to their economic value.

Profits Versus Social Spending

Within the discursive web, there is a concern from stakeholders that the inability to find and train youth as skilled workers will have a direct impact on the abilities of these corporations to increase their productivity and generate profit. The concern over access to skilled workers is articulated in Georgia's WIOA state plan:

> Loss of productivity affects business *profitability* and can be traced to several components. Employers consistently agree that poor attendance, a lack of understanding of the importance and meaning of teamwork, organizational skills, and time management must be addressed to ensure a reliable and consistent workforce and strong communities. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 53, italics added).

The state's WIOA plan signals that the lack of soft skills will substantially reduce the profitability of companies, making it a disincentive to hire and retain youth that fail to demonstrate the soft skills outlined in the plan. The concerns about financial losses are shared with other key stakeholders in the discursive web, including the United Way of Greater Atlanta as explained in this video-recorded event on opportunity youth:

> If they're not contributing to the economic engine, it leaves young people very vulnerable. Inaction is going to have HUGE [emphasis added from inflection in video] implications, right?" We know, that based on national numbers, *it costs Georgia $3 BILLION a year, in lost revenue and increased social services* (United Way of Greater Atlanta, 2017, 00:03:50, italics added)

There are numerous reports with varying estimates on how much the opportunity youth problem is costing the state of Georgia and local economies, but none of them are consistent. The speaker quoted from the video does not cite where the $3 billion figure comes from, but the expression of $3 billion as if it is a waste highlights the prominent economic burden concept historically associated with opportunity youth (Bridgeland, 2012; Belfield et al., 2012; United Way of Greater Atlanta, 2017). Fundamentally, it costs to reach these youth and to ensure that they have access to public assistance that helps them to meet their basic needs. Arguing that public expenditures for programs that serve youth are a waste may have severe consequences, but it is also a perspective in line with the neoliberal ideology and racist attitudes that sustain negative perceptions about welfare-to-work policies and the unemployed (Gais & Weaver, 2004; Gooden & Smith, 2005; Davis, 2007; Dumas, 2016). This is intertextually linked to the talent pipeline discourse described earlier in this chapter, where opportunity youth who are not working are cast as wasted talent.

Additionally, the emphasis on the consequences of failing to train and employ opportunity youth as *huge* signals a crisis (United Way of Greater Atlanta, 2017). Contrarily, more investments are needed to reach opportunity youth, but little is done to raise revenue as I described earlier (Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, 2020). The crisis discourse regarding the failure to train youth for jobs stands in direct contradiction to the state's approach to attracting business, as the ability to provide a strong and highly educated workforce is undercut by Georgia's neoliberal dependence on being a low tax state (Leachman et al., 2018; Kanso, 2020). Consequently, fewer investments are made in public services that could prevent youth and young adults from dropping out of school (Owens, 2020). Moreover, the stakeholders in this analysis fail to discursively construct race-neutral tax cuts as economic waste despite those cuts

producing very little redistribution in terms of the creation of living wage jobs (Leachman & Mazerov, 2015; Leachman et al., 2018; Hill, Robinson, Essig, & Wiehe, 2019; Kukreja, 2020).

Discouraging participation in public assistance is a significant feature in the opportunity youth discursive web. It is such a significant feature that job training organizations must commit to reducing the number of job training participants receiving public assistance (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020). Entities that work with opportunity youth and receive funds authorized through the state and local WIOA plan must provide data on the percentage of participants that are no longer receiving public assistance (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020).

Stakeholders who reference the costs of increased social support from the government frame those costs as waste. The explicit call-out of public expenditures highlights that costs are borne by all taxpayers – as though opportunity youth are a burden to everyone. The passage has the traits of moral panic (Farmer, 2010). For example, there is an enunciation of an economic and social problem requiring a policy response and youth figure prominently. As I described earlier, these costs are not balanced against any criticism of the consistent disinvestment in public systems, such as public schools (Owens, 2020).

In a study produced by the Carl Vinson Institute at the University of Georgia, a key stakeholder in Atlanta's opportunity youth discursive web, the author argues the following:

> State and federal social support programs provide medical services and access for low income youth and adults. Belfield et al. (2012) calculated the *total fiscal burden* of disconnected youth in the United States at approximately $1.15 trillion with an additional $3.57 trillion in social costs. The aggregate medical costs of disconnected youth amounted to $16 billion per year. Including the *cost of crime, social support, and lost*

> *productivity***,** Belfield et al. estimated the lifetime cost of one disconnected youth to society was *$529,000.* (Robert, 2017, p. 10, italics added)

The Belfield (2012) study was cited earlier in Chapter 2 as one of the most frequently used studies to quantify how costly opportunity youth can be to society. I italicized the phrase "total fiscal burden*"* (Robert, 2017, p. 10) to indicate how the author casts opportunity youth as a literal burden on the taxpayer if they are not employed. The author frames the cost as an enormous waste of tax-payer dollars – upwards to "$1.15 trillion" (Robert, 2017, p. 10). In the same study, the author leaves stakeholders in the discursive web with the following:

> Research indicates that once youth abandon formal society, they can be lost for years if not decades. From an economic perspective, the *cost of disconnection increases every year*. In addition, the strength and *productivity of the local labor market* is reduced with higher rates of disconnected youth populations. However, disconnected youth represent an opportunity for states to bolster their labor force by reconnecting and *growing this lost local talent*. Some states have implemented successful programs either through workforce development initiatives or public school programs that have reduced, not only the number of disconnected youths, but *also the future cost of public services*. (Robert, 2017, p. 16)

In this passage, the author is suggesting again that the costs are extreme unless stakeholders are able to "grow this local talent" (Robert, 2017, p. 16). Throughout this analysis, I highlighted the use of text or speech to indicate some form of crisis as an evidentiary and political warrant, and this quote from the governmental agency includes some of that text. There is an emphasis on the potential of youth to be "lost" for decades, which the author argues will result in decades of lost "productivity" in the labor market (Robert, 2017, p. 16). Additionally, the continued emphasis on

the costs of social services is one device that is consistently used, again creating a neoliberal narrative about *economic waste* that can purportedly be resolved by training youth for jobs.

Again, the influence of the neoliberal *economic waste* discourse is clear in the opportunity youth discursive web. Georgia requires all local job training agencies, including Atlanta's job training agency, to provide priority of service to individuals who are currently receiving public assistance:

> Priority for adult services must be given to recipients of public assistance or other low-income individuals, with added priority for individuals who are basic skills deficient. The goal is to provide opportunities to clients to once and for all *foster true and meaningful reduction of reliance* on public SNAP assistance in the state. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 93, italics added)

The example of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is given. SNAP, commonly known as food stamps, is one of the largest public assistance programs in the state and helps low-income families fight hunger. The *economic waste* dominant discourse reinforces the neoliberal culture of dependency myth commonly associated with public assistance participants (Harding et al., 2010). Lastly the hypocrisy in this discursive web as it relates to *economic waste* cannot be understated. The persistent skills or talent shortage crisis discourse that preempts the decrying of public spending on social services overshadows the state's persistent disinvestment in the very solution – public education – that policy analysts like the Carl Vinson Institute and other stakeholders promote as a solution.

The dominant *economic waste* discourse is also linked interdiscursively to the talent pipeline sub-theme in the *prioritizing business needs* dominant discourse. By privileging the notion that businesses can reduce turnover costs by building a pipeline of youth to jobs, the

authors of the state's WIOA plan imply that the costs of training are expensive (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020). There is a bigger concern absent in the discourse regarding turnover costs, and that is the quality (wages, access to paid leave, predictive scheduling) of the jobs waiting for youth at the end of training (Hesford, Malina, & Pizzini, 2016; Sturman, Park, & Ukhov, 2017).

While interpreters of the state plan are left with the notion that opportunity youth training can reduce costs for employers, there is no room in the state plan to help stakeholders understand how employers or businesses can do a better job at retaining the people that they employ. The absence of a policy and practice directive to address job quality speaks to a larger issue about the absence of job quality standards in the opportunity youth initiative itself. Without any attention to job quality within the opportunity youth discursive web, it is possible that the web reinforces a segregated labor market, where Black youth are steered into low wage, low quality employment while the corporations that employ them benefit from their labor (Pager, 2009; Alonso-Miller & del Rio, 2020; He, Kang, Tse, & Toh, 2019).

Undue Burden

The state's WIOA plan also indicates that focusing on opportunity youth is creating an undue burden as agencies tasked with training these youth are finding it difficult to do so:

> While OWD [Office of Workforce Development] recognizes the value and importance of WIOA's heightened emphasis on the alignment of programs that serve OSY [out-of-school youth] in order to ensure they obtain the skills necessary to prepare for educational achievement and workforce participation, *it creates an undue burden* for our local workforce development areas. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 137, italics added)

According to the Federal WIOA law, states must spend 70 percent of their youth-funding allocations on opportunity youth (2014). This statutory requirement exists because opportunity youth have significant barriers as it relates to finding employment or re-entering educational settings (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). However, the state is ignoring the possibility of those barriers and requesting to waive the requirement to spend funding originally appropriated for opportunity youth on in-school youth. If approved, the state would be spending more of its WIOA youth funding on in-school youth. This is creating some competition between both populations, where the state is arguing that in-school-youth need more resources. As a result, the state is proposing to disinvest in opportunity youth through the waiver.

> Due to the *constraints in ISY [in-school youth] funding***,** many high poverty counties no longer operate year-round in school programs, or if provided, limit programming to rising seniors with restricted services. *The federal requirement is creating a hardship* for many LWDAs [local workforce development agencies], resulting in terminated or limited services offered or provided to ISY under WIOA guidelines. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 138, italics added)

This passage is an important perspective on how focusing on opportunity youth creates an undue burden on in-school youth. If opportunity youth have the greatest need, one must wonder how spending more of the state's public dollars to address their needs would be discouraged. Specifically, one must ask how is this a burden? In my memo that is linked to the plan, I made note of an interesting discursive shift and influence that may result from this debate:

> In-school youth have a greater advantage by nature of being *in school,* no? Also, this burden would result in less investment in opportunity youth, which makes it odd to discuss this burden when the expenditures have been decreased through intentional policy

> choices. Therefore, I am coding this with the economic waste dominant discourse, since there seems to be less value in supporting opportunity youth compared to in-school-youth. Are "Out-of-school" youth not "at risk either" now? Seems to be some reworking of the discourse here - where the consequence is disinvestment. (Camardelle, 2020)

As noted in this memo, it appeared that the discursive shift happening in the policy document has severe material consequences – that being disinvestment in spending for opportunity youth. This "undue burden" (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 138) of having to spend a large share of funding on opportunity youth undermines the need that justified the statutory requirement in the first place (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017).

By shifting additional public money to fund job training services for in-school youth, the state is subsidizing additional corporate involvement in schools. Simultaneously, public schools are experiencing a significant disinvestment. For example, in the same year that this workforce plan was developed, Georgia's lawmakers cut state spending for K-12 public schools by nearly $1 billion (Owens, 2020). Stakeholders in the discursive web are describing the requirement to spend money on opportunity youth as an *economic burden*, despite the likelihood that, through disinvestment, they contributed to the "burden."

Dominant Discourse #3: Youth Crime Complex

The relationship between opportunity youth and crime reduction was apparent in the discursive web. One of the assumptions built into this dominant discourse is that job training can help reduce crime and that unemployed youth are the main perpetrators of criminal activity (Turner, 2014; Zatz, 2020). According to USASpending.gov, federal, state and local governments have spent millions of public tax dollars to hire consultants to measure the impact

of youth employment programs on crime rates, providing an evidentiary, accountability and political warrant for opportunity youth policies and programs.

Job Training as Policing

The *crime complex* discourse is interdiscursively linked to the crisis and economic waste discourses, where stakeholders propose job training for youth to reduce costs associated with incarceration. One way the crisis is implied is through the pathologization of youth by casting them as likely criminals involved in dangerous activities. Opportunity youth are perceived as dangerous, not just to the economy, but also to themselves and their community: "Opportunity youth represent so many valuable aspects of our work. From the value of early intervention to the *danger**s*** posed when supports aren't in place for those who need them" (United Way of Greater Atlanta, 2017, 0:25, italics added).

Georgia's WIOA state plan also includes a relationship with the Department of Juvenile Justice, a relationship that increases proximity between youth, incarceration and job training:

> OWD [Office of Workforce Development] has a strong relationship with the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). OWD will utilize this partnership to *bridge the gap for youth who have interacted with the justice system in Georgia*. OWD and local areas work with youth *correctional facilities* across the state to ensure that out-of-school youth leaving facilities are given a *warm hand-off* to education and training opportunities. Case managers work with these youths to enroll them in training options and assess their need for additional services. Local areas have worked with facilities, courts systems, transitions centers, and parole officers to ensure that these youths are given the opportunity to successfully connect to the workforce system. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 135, italics added)

In the above passage, the phrase "warm hand-off" (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 135) is used to describe the transition from incarceration to job training agencies. This strategy is linked to broader re-entry efforts that place value on employment (Zatz, 2020). Employment is understood as one of leading ways to reduce recidivism (Denver, Siwach, & Bushway, 2017), so ensuring that there is a "warm hand-off" can help the state meet that goal.

Through this focus on reducing recidivism, it appears that Georgia's job training system operates as an extension of the criminal justice system. The two systems seem to be so linked, that a component of the state's WIOA plan and infrastructure for helping participants finds jobs includes a section that frames job training as policing:

> The Special Workforce Assistance Team (*SWAT*) works closely with Chambers of Commerce, Industrial Authorities, and economic developers to fill the gaps and barriers to employment many job seekers face. *SWAT* job readiness events feature workshops on a plethora of topics such as improving interviewing skills, networking skills, and using social media in job search. The team is staffed with expert staff that are trained and prepared to assist job seekers with résumé assistance and the development of marketing tools necessary to *impress hiring managers*. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 207, italics added)

Ironically, SWAT is also the acronym used for the Special Weapons and Tactics unit of local law enforcement. Discursively, the SWAT acronym evokes imagery of policing which plays a negative role in the lives of Black youth who are over-policed (Baldridge, 2014; Zatz, 2020). This SWAT acronym and the law enforcement imagery extends the notion of the neoliberal

shadow carceral state, in which the everyday lives of Black youth are influenced by some function of surveillance or fear of punishment (Zatz, 2020).

Pre-Exposed as Criminals

In the discursive web, stakeholders are influenced again by the Carl Vinson Institute's research on opportunity youth and their perceived connection to crime. The study they provided to stakeholders that explored the opportunity youth landscape in Georgia described a relationship between criminal records and disconnection from school and work:

> In addition, as youth withdraw from the educational system, the *probability of becoming homeless, having a child as a teenager, or engaging in criminal activity increases substantially*. Another *precursor* to future disconnection was negative involvement in the criminal justice system. Disconnected youth exhibited *higher rates of criminal behavior* and by age 30 possessed a criminal record in greater proportions compared to the general population. (Robert, 2017, p. 7, italics added)

The author is implying here that capturing those youth who are disconnected can deter youth from a "life of crime" (Robert, 2017, p. 7), a generalization that lands well from a moral perspective among opportunity youth stakeholders within the discursive web. Across all the data artifacts observed in this study, the association of opportunity youth with criminal activity was a consistent sub-theme.

The *youth crime complex* discourse also supports the proliferation of summer job programs and policies to curb unhealthy behaviors. For instance, Georgia's Fulton County, which adheres to the state and regional WIOA plan, uses the following language to legitimize its summer jobs program:

> The Summer Youth Internship Program focuses on four priority service areas. These focus areas include: providing economic access by establishing education to employment pathways for disconnected youth, increasing communications outreach, providing social and emotional learning programs that support *quality out-of-school time,* and ensuring safety and justice by providing young people with alternatives to *unhealthy behaviors*. (Fulton County Government, n.d., para. 1, italics added)

While "unhealthy behaviors" (Fulton County Government, n.d., para. 1) are not listed in detail, a binary is formed: healthy versus unhealthy behaviors. Since summer youth employment programs are largely affiliated with the youth crime complex discourse as I described in the literature review, this framing sets the stage for readers to associate opportunity youth that are not employed with delinquents engaging in "unhealthy behaviors" (Fulton County Government, n.d., para. 1). It is abundantly clear that the summer youth job program's objective is to steer youth away from criminal or other unproductive activities - thus building on the neoliberal notion that youth job training programs can operate as a form of policing and social control (Zatz, 2020). This theme is advanced by the United Way:

> We know that when youth find *work in summer*, they are motivated to complete school, develop *marketable skills*, are more likely to reach their potential, and are less likely to be involved in *negative behaviors*. This initiative is *putting business leaders like yourselves into the communities* to show kids that a life full of promise is not out of reach just because you were born in the *wrong neighborhood*. All these kids need is to see a leader that looks like them to show them what is theirs for the taking. (Little, 2019, para. 4)

In the above paragraph, there are numerous discursive elements that signal pathology. The quote is captured in an Op-Ed penned by the president and CEO of the United Way of Greater Atlanta

in the state's premier newspaper, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The title of the Op-Ed is "Build Better Opportunities for Black Youth," making the entire piece specifically about Black opportunity youth – the only race-explicit artifact analyzed in this discursive web.

The Op-Ed represents a concern of negative behaviors resulting from out-of-school time in the summer, which advances the stereotype of deviancy and criminality among Black youth (Baldridge, 2014; Brown, 2018; Dumas, 2016; Zatz, 2020). There is a stubborn assumption that when young people do not have any productive opportunities during the summer months, they are more likely to be involved in criminal activity, including drug use and gun violence (Baldridge, 2014; Weaver, 2019). These perceptions of negative behavior paint a discursive picture of Black youth as prone to crime (Baldridge, 2014). Consequently, summer youth job programs become deputized with the role of preventing crime particularly among Black youth when key stakeholders lift them up as a solution to crime. This *youth crime complex* discourse is repeated by corporations, in the media, the Carl Vinson Institute, and others to construct some truth pertaining to the legitimacy and effectiveness of summer job training programs. Simultaneously, this discourse fails to address the heightened proximity to police in Black communities during a time of prolonged police brutality spurred by anti-Black racism in schools, in neighborhoods, and in many other domains of social life (Baldridge, 2014; Love, 2016; Dumas, 2016; Waldron, 2020).

Through this neoliberal discourse in the opportunity youth discursive web, the initiative may be viewed as a shadow carceral innovation, another form of neoliberal governmentality that marks youth as at-risk or dangerous (Zatz, 2020). In *Get to Work or Go to Jail*, Zatz (2020) writes that "shadow measures are one key way that limited opportunities are consigned to people at the expanding bottom of the U.S. class structure – and they help to legitimize an unfair social

order by marking individuals as unworthy of the shrinking and increasingly contingent services, supports, and work opportunities under neoliberalism" (p. 347). Under the neoliberal shadow carceral state, surveillance and law and order extends to the opportunity youth initiative. Summer employment for Black youth is viewed here as a crime-prevention tactic, but systemic barriers that result in disproportionate amounts of policing and incarceration in communities of color remain silent in the discourse.

Dominant Discourse #4: Helpless Youth

The assumption of helplessness enables policies and programs to reduce the human value of young people in public programs (France & Threadgold, 2016). As I mentioned in Chapter 2, neoliberal processes of individualism facilitate helplessness among youth by casting their social conditions as a result of their own shortcomings. The discourses of youth helplessness appears in many ways through the opportunity youth discursive web, but are labeled as concerns of helplessness, skills gaps, and lost potential, which are all interdiscursively related to the *war for talent* discourse.

Employability

The state's WIOA plan explains that one of the most significant barriers to meeting the needs of employers is the lack of employable workers. Within the plan, the authors describe the problem as one expressed exclusively by employers, where "employers consistently agree that poor attendance, a lack of understanding of the importance and meaning of teamwork, organizational skills, and time management must be addressed to ensure a reliable and consistent workforce and strong communities" (Georgia Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 51). Young people who are presumed to be lacking these characteristics are "basic skills deficient"

(Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 137). The state's WIOA plan defines basic skills deficient in the following way:

> An individual who is unable to compute or solve problems, read, write, or speak English at a level necessary to function on the job, in the individual's family, or in society satisfies the *basic skills deficient* requirement for WIOA services. In assessing basic skills, Boards must use assessment instruments that are valid and appropriate for the target population and must provide reasonable accommodation in the assessment process, if necessary, for individuals with disabilities. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 137, italics added)

The theme of basic skills is common across all data sources used to construct the discursive web, noting that opportunity youth should be accessing programs that will allow them to increase their basic skills. Basic skills (also referred to as soft skills) are loosely defined, but in Georgia's workforce system basic skills are those related to personal qualities such as time management, the way a person dresses, general problem-solving skills, and personal productivity (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020). The state has responded to the issue of basic skills in several ways, including the implementation of work-readiness assessments. For example, for a fee Georgia offers a certification to help jobseekers assess their employability called the Georgia Work Ready Certificate (Lakes, 2011).

The most prominent feature of the *employability* discourse exists not only in the state's WIOA plan and the job training policies related specifically to opportunity youth, but also in Georgia's K-12 curriculum. Below is an excerpt of recommendations to address *employability* from the Georgia Department of Education's task force on Georgia Employability Skills:

> Some employers call it work ethic; some call it soft skills, and others call it *employability* skills. Regardless of the term used, *employers have a need for young workers with these skills.* According to Georgia's business and industry representatives**,** *the number one reason potential candidates are hired is the same reason employees are fired—soft skills*. Employers often voice their concern for improved soft skills in the workplace. Their voices are *stronger, louder, and more demanding*:
>
> - Rayonier in 2014: "We need those soft skills. We need people who are collaborative, who have the ability to communicate both verbally and through written form. I need craftsmen that can craft an e-mail."
> - Georgia-Pacific in 2016: "Soft skills are a consistent theme in workforce needs. It is more than just showing up to work on time but also how you work on a team. The technical competencies are important, but one person can't save an organization. Employees must work as a team to succeed."
> - Pratt & Whitney in 2017: "Pratt & Whitney looks for these characteristics in entry level workers: *work ethic*, follow directions, *attitude*, team player**,** *get along with people*, pay attention to detail, etc. At first we thought mechanical skills and math skills would be most important." (Georgia Department of Education, 2017, p. 3, italics added)

Here, the soft and basic skills theme is interdiscursively linked to the *prioritizing business needs* dominant discourse, where the task force recommendations are a response to the evidentiary warrant that employers are "stronger, louder, and more demanding" than ever (Georgia Department of Education, 2017, p. 3). This is an example of how neoliberalism has crept into public schooling and has established itself as a standard in public education, quite literally

(Apple, 2006; Dumas, 2013; Spring, 2015; Dumas, 2016). In the recommendations published by the Department of Education, the first asks school systems to integrate employability skills into curriculum and learning experiences from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary. The recommendation suggests that basic skills training should be implemented across the full spectrum of the learning experience, beginning with the youngest learners.

The task force itself is composed of business leaders, education stakeholders at the state and local level, and representatives from other state agencies including the Department of Labor and private consultants. The report includes the following passage that provides insight on employability needs from an industry-specific perspective:

> Manufacturing businesses are always working to beat their competitors in capturing waves of increased consumer demand. With the speed that the world is moving today, the period of time from recognizing a wave of demand and increasing production has become very short. *The pipeline of resources has to begin flowing almost immediately*, and one of the most important resources are *skilled* employees. With technology, *globalization*, and quicker more efficient transportation, it has become very easy to obtain raw materials and components. The race has now become who is the fastest to *procure talented resources* to transform those materials into a product." (Georgia Department of Education, 2017, p. 6, italics added)

Note that in the above passage, the employer is referring to talent as a human resource. This thinking is in line with the human capital arguments that are pervasive in the study of neoliberalism, where competitiveness is driving human capital or talent development while undermining the needs of workers (Harvey, 2007; Hall, 2013; Massey, 2013; Spring, 2015). Ironically, the quote in the task force report comes from a manufacturing plant manager. I view

the irony metaphorically, in which the manager is describing the production of human capital just as they describe the production of raw materials into a product to sell and generate profit. This is also reflected in the state's WIOA plan, where the state writes that basic skills deficiency leads to a "loss of productivity affects business profitability" (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 53).

Helplessness

The argument that young people might not enter the workforce "without help" is also significant in the opportunity youth discursive web. This is an attempt to advance the concept of *helplessness* among young people. This concept of *helplessness* is also pervasive throughout the opportunity youth discursive web and focuses on the personal attributes of young people while neglecting the more systemic challenges that youth are facing in the everyday life (Giroux, 2008; Baldridge, 2014). Additionally, although there are numerous quotes in the data that suggest that *helplessness* is an opportunity youth problem, there is very little research cited in any of the material to suggest this is actually an issue. However, the Carl Vinson Institute's paper on opportunity youth does dive into *helplessness* as a personal, learned attribute:

> … *learned helplessness*, defined as the exposure to detrimental and uncontrollable events. Research has shown that learned helplessness may lead to physical or mental distress (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). Distress reduces self-esteem and decreases motivation to alter one's plight; existing conditions are maintained which reinforces the *learned helplessness mentality* (Boyd, 2014). Positive intervention in this learned helplessness cycle may break the routine and lead to enhanced outcomes. (Robert, 2017, p. 6, italics added)

This concept of learned helplessness fits within the dominant discourse of *helplessness*, where

youth are presumed to be inherently incapable of navigating society on their own. This neoliberal concept is particularly hegemonic, in that it prescribes a pathology to opportunity youth who are not just children but also young adults as old as age 24. Although the effort is geared towards opportunity youth between the ages of 16-24, these young adults are still viewed discursively as children. In another article published in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* but also about the 100K Opportunities Initiative job fair, a recruiter from Fedex is quoted saying they are participating in the job fair "to show these *kids* that we care about them and want to help them continue to grow and hopefully build a great career" (Rogers, 2018, para. 7, italics added). These assumptions about *helplessness* also mimic many of the concerns related to the neoliberal culture of dependency concept, which is common in the welfare-to-work policy discourse (Hancock, 2004; Davis, 2007; Ayers & Carlone, 2007).

The above quote is also intertextually linked to remarks about Black youth provided by the United Way of Greater Atlanta CEO, where he states that "living in communities where such access to high-demand careers that offer job opportunities and role models are scarce stifles hope and diminishes motivation" (Little, 2019, para 2). There is ambivalence in these statements about the role structural factors may play in causing a sense of *helplessness* among youth, and in this case, specifically Black youth. The suggestion that youth helplessness is a learned attribute presents these youth as helpless, or unaware of their own potential. The alternative consideration that is missing from the discursive web is that Black youth receive less help in remaining in school and finding meaningful jobs than their white peers. For instance, White job seekers are more likely to access networks that help them move up the economic ladder or receive specialized education in fields of study that they want to pursue (McDonald, 2011; Fernandez & Greenberg, 2013; Rivera, 2016). Inequitable access to professional networks can facilitate racial

disparities in income, educational attainment, and wealth. The suggestion that helplessness is a personal attribute in the opportunity youth discursive web mutes racial wealth disparities that were established through enslavement and sustained through neoliberal policies in the United States (Asante-Muhammad et al., 2017).

Race Neutrality

The leading objective of this study was to examine the ways that opportunity youth are constructed by job training policies and stakeholders within a discursive web. When conducting the CDA, I asked, "what is missing in the discourse and what are the implications of that element being excluded?" The analysis revealed that there is a significant absence of the role of structural racism in the opportunity youth discursive web, which advances the race-neutral goals of neoliberal governmentality.

Using the literature on neoliberalism and race-neutrality, I found that each of the stakeholders in the discursive web engaged neoliberal discourses in ways that have implications for race, whether it was explicitly named or not. In fact, I found that race-neutral neoliberalism is translated into the opportunity youth initiative by stakeholders through the public-private partnership model in a manner that sustain negative discourses about Black youth in the broader social world (Baldridge, 2014). As discussed in the literature review, the denial of racism profoundly effects Black youth. Neoliberal logics that advance race-neutrality are deployed in the discursive web, including the common culture of dependency and skills gap narratives.

The Culture of Dependency

There was very little discussion of the role that racism might play in maintaining the conditions that lead young people to become disconnected from school and from work in the discursive web (Lipman, 2013; Dumas, 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Turner & Beneke, 2020;

Rasco, 2020). The narrow focus on class and poverty perpetuates the neoliberal culture of dependency myth that is associated with traditional welfare-to-work policies and programs. The consequences include disinvestment in the welfare state, which is understood by neoliberals as a more effective strategy to respond to economic problems such as high youth unemployment (Dumas, 2016). In the following passage, a foundation notes its excitement about the 100K Opportunities Initiative's potential to address dependency by insisting that investing in youth – by way of a job fair – is important for breaking the "cycle of poverty":

> The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation is very excited to partner with the 100K Opportunities Initiative. We believe in the fundamental importance of and value in investing in our youth, especially those isolated from opportunity and struggling to break the *cycle of poverty***.** (Elison, 2018, para. 8, italics added)

Throughout the entire WIOA state plan, there is no mention of race or systemic barriers, such as a long history of racial discrimination in the labor market. After reading the full document line-by-line, I used Nvivo to search the 332-page WIOA state plan document for the terms "race," "racism," "discrimination," "equity," "Black" and "African American" and yielded no results. These terms do not appear in the document. While the list is not an exhaustive set of terms that might speak to attention to race in the state's job training policies, the absence of these basic terms illustrate the exclusively race-neutral nature of the job training policy itself.

While significant terms are not in the document, there is a regular focus in the plan regarding personal responsibility and individual skills – key features of neoliberal ideology (Harvey, 2007; Hall, 2013). The plan also describes the lack of qualified talent as a structural barrier that individuals need to solve. However, there are elements in the state plan that imply that structural barriers exist, they are just not explicitly tied to racism, which places a particularly

heavy burden on Black job seekers to prove that those barriers exist:

> Governor Kemp's goal to ensure someone's *potential is not determined by their zip code or county*, the State has a goal to increase access points to individuals and businesses located in *remote areas*. This greatly enhances the workforce system's ability to serve *rural Georgia* and increase statewide prosperity. (Governor's Office of Workforce Development, 2020, p. 39, italics added)

There is some interesting contrast here in the use of the zip code as a determinant of someone's potential. In the above quote, the zip code criterion is used mostly to describe how geography plays a significant role in where people access quality employment and training opportunities. But in another document, specifically about what employers and communities can do the help Black youth thrive through workforce development, the zip code reference is used differently:

> *Zip code as destiny*: Many young people live in communities where their connections to quality schools, healthcare, out-of-school activities and access to jobs that nurture their potential and provide them opportunities to grow are frayed at best. *Living in communities* where such access to high-demand careers that offer job opportunities and role models are scarce stifles hope and diminishes motivation. (Little, 2020, para. 3, italics added)

In the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article quoted above, the author is more concerned about the role that the zip code plays in determining limited access to resources for Black youth. Both the governor's goal and the text in the above quote are similar, though. They are both concerned with proximity to resources, although one is more explicit about proximity to resources for Black youth while the governor is more concerned about proximity for people living in rural areas.

The emphasis on helplessness and the prioritization of business needs in the discursive web clears the way for the substantial role that private stakeholders have played in influencing opportunity youth policy, and because of that process, the lack of profits and productivity is largely blamed on opportunity youth who are disproportionately Black (Lewis, 2020). As described throughout this chapter, Black youth are framed as a commodity for businesses who have human capital needs, and discarded when they are unable to fulfill those needs through job training programs (Ossei-Owusu, 2012; Dumas, 2016). They are framed as an economic waste because they turn to public assistance in times of financial crisis or when few employment opportunities exist.

Human capital arguments are flawed in their perversion of structural inequality. Elite stakeholders in the discursive web from the education, workforce, and welfare sectors have argued that the real fault for failing to meet the demands of a globalizing economy is the skills gap (Spring, 2015). As a result, policy entrepreneurs and reformers have directed energy towards job training programs that focus heavily on influencing the aspirations, behavior, and skills of youth (Spring, 2015). This trend is aided by the globalization rhetoric suggesting that Atlanta is anticipated to face major workforce shortages in the coming years unless it prepares a skilled workforce.

The Skills Gap

When I first began my career in job training philanthropy in Atlanta, the work was framed in terms of basic economics: there is the supply side of the business (labor and employees) and the demand side (employers). This neoliberal framing has driven much of the work happening in the opportunity youth realm and certainly results from shifting the welfare state to the free market. As a result of this framing, it was determined by local economic

developers, the chambers of commerce, and policymakers that the skills gap is the sole culprit preventing Atlanta's employers from amassing talented workers and keeping Black opportunity youth from finding meaningful, living wage employment despite racial discrimination in the labor market (Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Dickinson & Oaxaca, 2009; Zatz, 2020). However, the skills gap narrative is heavily driven by employers in the low-wage job market, a market where low-income workers and people of color are overrepresented (Spring, 2015).

I am reminded of Apple's (2005) analysis of neoliberalism in education, in which certain crises are manufactured to advance the goals of a privatized sector. The skills gap, as Spring (2015) suggests, is understood as a manufactured crisis. Citing Krugman and others, Apple (2005) argues that there is not a skills gap, there is just an oversupply of jobs. More recent research argues that the skills gap discourse is more of a myth used to justify the maintenance of poor labor conditions, particularly among Black workers (Moore & Morton, 2017; Hanks, 2018). Despite the concerns about the legitimacy of the skills gap narrative, stakeholders in the discursive web placed more emphasis on tracking students into vocational or technical education versus degree programs. Additionally, corporations were invited to participate in the curriculum process to make sure that the skills required to be an employable and profitable worker are represented in the K-12 and job training setting.

While employers are facing shortages in certain industries and states are reacting to those shortages by offering economic development incentives such as tax breaks and customized job training programs, policy must address the fact that part of the explanation for workforce shortages is the lack of willingness for employers to pay decent wages with benefits, non-unionization, and persistent discrimination in hiring. The focus on the skills gap in Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative treats labor markets as purely transactional. The denial of structural

problems in the skills gap discourses extends across the discursive web, operating as another mechanism of race-neutral neoliberal governmentality (Dumas, 2016; Benbow & Hora, 2016; Viczo, Lorusso, & McKechnie, 2019).

Conclusion

Collectively, the web of discourses I presented in this chapter have significant implications for Black opportunity youth. In the analysis of the data for this study, four dominant discourses that are situated in neoliberal ideology emerged. These dominant discourses, and the sub-themes that connected them all together, act as technologies of neoliberal governmentality that construct a truth about opportunity youth. The discursive web in this section manufactures a series of crises that sustain neoliberal logics about opportunity youth that legitimize the dominance of corporate actors in the lives of youth. I found that the stakeholders in this initiative engage with those neoliberal discourses in various ways that sustain negative characterizations of Black youth while simultaneously privileging economic expansion and the health of business markets in Atlanta. In the next and final chapter, I will expand on these findings and the implications further.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Since we can hardly accuse him (man) of being naïve, and since he clearly goes out of his way to avoid the obvious implications of labor exploitation in the South, we cannot help concluding that the work in many respects may have the effect of a powerful piece of propaganda in favor of the status quo. If the 'race' problem in the United States is preeminently a moral question, it must naturally be resolved by a moral means, and this conclusion is precisely the social illusion which the ruling political class has constantly sought to produce – Oliver Cox (1948, p. 538)

The purpose of this study was to understand how youth who are neither in school nor working are constructed in Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. Additionally, the purpose is to understand how neoliberal discourses are translated into the opportunity youth discursive web by stakeholders. These understandings are important to fields of study that include the critical analysis of education, adult education, human capital development, and workforce development because they can help inform how policymakers and other stakeholders advance racism in their everyday, state-led objectives to create a talent pipeline for employers. This final chapter presents a discussion of the findings, implications and conclusions drawn from Chapter 4. The chapter also includes alternative discourses, loosely constructing a new, race-conscious discursive web that confronts the racial neoliberal (Goldberg, 2009) dynamics that are currently operating in the opportunity youth discursive web.

Discussion of Findings

Collectively, the web of discourses I presented in this study may limit the possibility of job training policies and programs to serve as a pathway to economic liberation for Black youth. While the discursive web was broken down into specific parts in the previous chapter, taken

together these discourses can be summarized. In the analysis of the data for this study, four dominant discourses that are situated in neoliberal ideology emerged. These thematic dominant discourses work together as a technology facilitated by stakeholders that construct various truths about opportunity youth. Consequently, the stakeholders within Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative translate the logics of neoliberalism into the field, a process that some fear facilitates the expansion of inequality (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Goldberg, 2009; Hall, 2013; Dumas, 2016; Zatz, 2020).

The first major implication of this finding is that negative perceptions of Black youth are constructed. The discourse constructs opportunity youth as a drain on Atlanta's resources and they are construed in the texts/media as helpless and basic skills deficient by standards established by the business community. By labeling Black youth as inferior, it becomes logical to refuse equitable opportunities in employment and in education to youth who do not pursue a traditional path to a college degree. Instead, these youth are sought after by job training programs and job fairs in an effort to prevent profitable talent from falling through the cracks. Since the focus on opportunity youth includes a focus on crime prevention and profitability, a neoliberal logic is formed that suggests that opportunity youth that are basic skills deficient do not deserve to be paid living wages that are on par with someone who holds a college degree, whom are disproportionately White workers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Moreover, there is an assimilationist effect of determining what constitutes employability (Massey, 2013), and the association of opportunity youth with non-employable soft skills suggests that the way they engage in conflict resolution, time management, the way they dress, and other personal behaviors must change in order for them to be desirable candidates for Atlanta's employers. Lastly, the

youth crime complex dominant discourse suggests that Black youth are more prone to violence or criminal activity.

These findings match existing evidence that finds that discourses regarding Black youth are commonly associated with deficit narratives (Ginwright & Kirshner, 2012; Baldridge, 2014). Well-known studies on Black youth tend to summarize their behaviors and position in society as exclusively symptomatic of their own choices rather than addressing the systemic issues that impede positive youth development (Lipman, 2011; Ginwright & Kirshner, 2012; Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2016). This framing has been prevalent in qualitative studies that interpret Black youth as deviant (Ginwright & Cammarota, 1997; Dumas, 2016). The narratives surrounding Black youth have historically, and in some cases still do, center around terms of deficiency including *at-risk, disadvantaged, poor*, and even *deprived* (Martinez & Rury, 2012). As Dumas (2016) writes, the use of these terms "highlight how the neoliberal project, far from eschewing race, recruits familiar racial imaginations for its ideological and policy agendas" (p. 96). These terms were identified intertextually across the artifacts analyzed in this study, suggesting an evidentiary warrant that informs interventions and programs proposed to *save* Black youth. Deficit narratives of individual and moral failure are deployed as a mechanism of neoliberal governmentality. As a result, the opportunity youth initiative and the stakeholders that engage in these discourses run the risk of reinforcing these damaging narratives, even though the intent of shifting the language to describe these youth to opportunity youth was to appear less pejorative (Bridgeland, 2012) .

One of the major components of the opportunity youth discourse that I struggled with is the construction of opportunity youth, as old as 24 years old, as *kids* that should be treated as such. I certainly felt this way when I was a 24-year old whose first career experience was as an

opportunity youth funder that provided grant money to nonprofit job training organizations to solve the youth unemployment problem. In the discursive web, stakeholders discursively treat opportunity youth as helpless, with no other real experiences or any form of self-agency. I often find myself reminding people that Black opportunity youth are not just young people who did not complete a high school or college credential, but they are also parents, young adults who have been harmed by the criminal legal system, and individuals who may have been valid in their reasons for not engaging in the labor market. For these reasons, I feel immense displeasure when opportunity youth job fairs – such as the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative – are implemented by stakeholders to recruit youth to work at minimum wage fast food restaurants with no predictable schedules, livable wages or any other work supports that would be required to support young adults with little financial help from other sources. In *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed (2011) summarizes this implication of neoliberal ideology:

> Neoliberal-multicultural racialization has made this disparity appear fair by ascribing racialized privilege to neoliberalism's beneficiaries and racialized stigma to its dispossessed. In particular, it has valued its beneficiaries as multicultural, reasonable, law-abiding, and good global citizens and devalued the dispossessed as monocultural, backward, weak, and irrational—unfit for global citizenship because they lack the proper neoliberal subjectivity. (p. 44)

In my view, this discursive practice renders the identities of Black youth invisible in the discursive web and warrants the view of youth as human capital with economic value for corporations while simultaneously legitimizing the exploitation and negative construction of Black youth in the opportunity youth field.

The second implication is that the discursive web distances the opportunity youth problem in Atlanta from a more redistributive, economic justice vision for Black people and instead moves the issues squarely toward the profit and production needs of private business/corporations. As a result, discourses of racial equity, democracy, and justice are invisible. These values are absent in the neoliberal discourses advanced by stakeholders in this study, which enables the denial of structural racism to operate as a mechanism of neoliberal governmentality within Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. Instead, concepts of business expansion are proffered as a solution to social problems.

To acknowledge structural racism in the economy would violate the *American creed* that the political economy of the United States was built upon. The creed also facilitates the expansion of neoliberal ideology into new markets that sustain racial inequality, just as I have found within Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative. Racial inequality is maintained because the creed defines America's value proposition as individualism, freedom and hard work (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Strohl, 2016; Massey, 2013; Hall, 2013). This race-neutral, neoliberal logic within the discursive web facilitates inequalities for Black youth (Dumas, 2016). Stakeholders engage in discourses that advances concepts of self-governance among youth without support from the state. Instead of collective support for resolving social issues, Dumas (2016) writes that "neoliberalism manages the problem of race largely by promising increased freedom and economic opportunities through a market driven by choice and efficiency rather than racial ideology or allegiance" (p. 99).

The quotes regarding the impact to a company's bottom line or the reduction of productivity because of a lack of a prepared talented workforce facilitates perceptions that opportunity youth only have a place in the economy if they are active participants through wage

labor (Massey, 2013). My critical analysis draws a similar conclusion, as it appears Atlanta's opportunity youth are overwhelmingly viewed discursively in terms of their economic value. This minimizes possibilities for racial and economic justice to become a priority in this initiative.

A third implication of the discursive web is that it legitimizes public and private spending on job training policies that would help corporations achieve their human capital goals and keep the costs of doing business low while simultaneously failing to advance economic and racial justice objectives for youth. Focusing on job training as a solution diverts resources – namely funding – away from other redistributive policies or programs that might be more effective at improving the educational and economic prospects of Black opportunity youth. This shift to job training to solve systemic issues among Black youth who are not in school also constructs the problem as an individual one. The focus on individual effort in Atlanta's opportunity youth initiative also shifts the focus away from work that could facilitate the elimination of structural barriers in education and employment, and instead focuses on the administration of job training programs, performance goals and evaluations that define success mostly by placements and establishing platforms where corporations have the most authority in how the workforce development system is designed. Stakeholders within the initiative facilitate scapegoating by avoiding critique of structural barriers that impede economic opportunity for Black youth, a common tactic used by elites who often deny racism (Van Dijk, 1993).

To summarize, stakeholders deploy various mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality in the opportunity youth discursive web to create an illusion of a labor market free of racial inequality. The dominant discourses analyzed in this study ignore the reality that discrimination and other structural barriers within education systems exist. Additionally, the discursive web sustains inequality by allowing corporations to play the most powerful role in the design and

implementation of opportunity youth initiative. One outcome includes economic disadvantage among Atlanta's Black youth who are steered to work in jobs where the sole interest of the employer is to make a profit and keep the costs of doing business low. Built within a race-neutral neoliberal context, this discursive web legitimizes the idea that there should be less public policy intervention in the removal of structural barriers, and instead, markets should lead on this issue (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1992; Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001; Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Goldberg, 2009; Melamed, 2011; Hall, 2013; Dumas, 2016; Zatz, 2020).

As the discursive web in this study shows, workforce development in Georgia is framed in terms of basic economics: there is the supply side of the business (labor and employees) and the demand side (employers). This framing has driven much of the work happening in the realm of job training policies and programs and certainly results from a neoliberal shift of the welfare state to the free market. These neoliberal discourses must be critically challenged, given the implications they may have for reproducing economic disadvantage for Black youth (Hall, 2013; Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2013; Dumas, 2016).

Considerations for the Education Field – Neoliberal Logics of School Failure

Before youth interact with the workforce system as young adults or find themselves as opportunity youth, they have developed a set of experiences from their own K-12 schooling. Although the analysis illuminates the ways in which elite corporate actors play a significant role in shaping the discourses surrounding opportunity youth, they have had an influence on traditional public education as well. The same neoliberal logics translated across the discursive web exist among school leaders, education policymakers, and others, thus contributing to youth being pushed out of schools (Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2016; Selman, 2017; Zatz, 2020). Black youth are negatively constructed in the discourse and often blamed for problems that neoliberals

are responsible for creating. The neoliberal logic of *school failure* has served as one of the most significant tools used to drive young people out of public schools and disinvest in their public education.

For instance, neoliberals have spent decades advancing reform ideas that center market interests by arguing that democratic participation in education policy decision-making produces significant barriers for school reformers. These reformers want to bypass government regulations and resolve the problem of *failing schools* through market-based strategies. As a result, they have pushed schools – and students – into new systems of governance. This is done in the context of the need for a competitive, well-prepared workforce required to improve economic rankings in the global market. In *Education Governance for the 21st Century: Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform*, Finn and Petrilli (2013) posit that current education governance systems are failing. One of the causes of this failure, they argue, is the thick layering of government (school district, municipal, state and federal) responsible for running and resourcing public schools. According to them, this layering has resulted in "obsolescence, clumsiness, and misalignment [which has] come to define the governance of public education" (p. 21). Too many cooks in the kitchen presumably accounts for consistently poor academic outcomes for students. In one instance, the authors argue that charter schools are limited by the current governance structure and hampered from realizing their potential as strong alternatives for students and parents. As Finn and Petrilli explain, charter schools are intended to create new markets by increasing competition with district schools and providing an "escape hatch" (p. 28) for those students in consistently failing schools. The authors note that "school district bureaucracies abhor these upstart rivals, using their power and influence over local and state politicians, they do all they can to contain the growth of charters and, where possible, eradicate them" (p. 28).

Market mechanisms attempt to strip local control from communities and instead shift the locus of authority to entities with ties to private industry. By doing so, thick democracy is undermined, and the advocacy work to push public schools in a more socially progressive and just direction in terms of racial equity and critical pedagogy is threatened. By limiting community-led accountability to shape and influence the outcomes of public schools, students—namely Black students—are disenfranchised, dispossessed, and pushed out (Lipman, 2011).

Corporate influence on government has led to disinvestment in public schools and gentrification in communities of color. The brutal effects of public school privatization and gentrification are plenty, and include physical, racial, and cultural displacement, homelessness, and capital accumulation for privatizers (Buras, 2015). Corporations lobby policymakers for tax incentives to drive real estate and job creation in under-developed areas. Lipman (2011) notes that financing corporations through tax cuts leads to major losses in tax revenue that should otherwise drive resources to support public schools and their students. According to a recent report, Georgia's students and families lost an estimated $109 million in school revenue as a result of the state's tax abatements for corporations (Wen, Furtado & Leroy, 2021). Schools in low-income communities often end up closing as families are pushed out of their communities and new schools – including private and charter schools – are reopened in their place as a consequence of attracting new corporations to new areas, which leads to further gentrification (Lipman, 2011).

Lipman (2011) argues that "before communities can be gentrified, they have to be devalued, prepared for redevelopment, and reimagined as places of value" (p. 92). Citing Wilson, Wouters and Gremmemos (2004), she proceeds to note that to prepare for gentrification, "it is necessary to construct a reality of easily discardable people and social life" (as cited in Lipman,

2011, p. 92). Discursively, Black neighborhoods are imagined as impoverished spaces of disorder, crime, instability, and in need of fixing. Additionally, schools in Black communities are labeled as failing, violent, and dysfunctional. These neoliberal narratives resonate with those surfaced by this study, as they likewise frame black youth and the schools they attend as deficient. Lipman's (2011) and Wilson et al.'s (2004) assertion that the pathologization of Black communities is a prerequisite for dispossession is evidenced by Atlanta's (and other cities) neoliberal logic that students become opportunity youth because schools are failing them. Yet the culpability of corporate actors in this failure is not considered and does not appear in discourses on the challenges of workforce development. Unemployed youth are framed as an economic burden, but tax-exempt corporations, partly responsible for gutting the public schools these youth once attended, are not.

Neoliberals also contributed to the expansion of zero-tolerance policies that called for a crackdown on a broad range of behaviors on school campuses. These punitive discipline policies have origins in decisions that have been deployed in the mass incarceration and policing system (Casella, 2003). For decades, advocates and researchers have documented harsh punishment for students of color and poor students, often resulting in suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests that adversely impact educational experiences. It has been found that discipline tactics like these cause increased contact with the criminal and juvenile justice system. This contact has resulted not only in school drop-out (which ironically creates a larger pool of so-called opportunity youth), but also in a troubling pattern of incarceration among young students and in some cases, long-term imprisonment. Additionally, these more punitive discipline measures have precipitated a rapid increase in the use of security equipment in school buildings, facilitating

another method for capital accumulation among corporations in the security sector (Casella, 2003).

Monahan and Torres (2010) contend that the "neoliberal ideological climate plays an important role of cultures of control in public education" (p. 4). Neoliberals, particularly corporate actors and policymakers, contribute to the discourse on failing schools through punitive responses to low achievement among already under-resourced, hyper-surveillanced schools in communities of color. As a result, policy actors have come to prioritize interventions or solutions that are developed outside of the public education system, including job training programs. Where public interventions fail, policy actors look to corporations. It is important to think critically about the relationship between public school disinvestment, the prioritization of corporate interests, and the opportunity youth at the heart of current workforce policy and programs.

The preceding examples highlight the role that neoliberal logics play in public schools and is used here to underscore the irony of corporations pathologizing Black youth in the discursive web. Through profit maximizing reforms and lobbying, corporate stakeholders under the veil of private-public partnerships with schools have eroded schooling experiences among Black youth through disinvestment, displacement and the expansion of carceral control. These conditions must be considered when interpreting the discourses present in the opportunity youth discursive web. In summary, opportunity youth are blamed for their circumstances when it is the adoption of deficit narratives by corporations and subsequent policies enacted by lawmakers that reinforce dire circumstances both in school and outside.

Envisioning New Possibilities for Opportunity Youth Discourses

Abolish the Classification of Opportunity Youth

This study of discourses and policies directly impacting Black youth and young adults uncovers systemic exploitation. Constructing race-neutral deficit narratives about Black youth and then injecting them into public policy may limit the agency of these youth (Baldridge, 2014). Additionally, these narratives maintain white supremacy in a myriad of ways. According to Gorski (2010), the use of deficit narratives cast a "scornful gaze" (p. 152) of power upon those who are not part of the dominant race and class. The terms "disadvantaged", "at-risk", and "opportunity youth" are used as categorical labels that "distance those on the margins" from the powerful core of policy making (Spring, 2007, p. 7). Cahill (2015) writes that "this damaging segregationist labelling serves to reify the working class other as opposed to positively influence educational, social, cultural and political experiences of the marginalized" (p. 312).

Alternatively, youth job training stakeholders should abolish all neoliberal, race-neutral labels that other or categorize Black youth. Sylvia Wynter (1992) directs us towards a more humanist approach that may invite Black youth into spaces of power and agency:

> It is only when such a category moves out of its negated place, therefore, that the grammarians of an order (as in the case where the lay humanists intelligentsia refused their liminal role in the Scholastic system of knowledge), can be freed from their system-maintaining "structural models" and prescriptive categories. (p. 67)

Wynter's (1992) approach illuminates possibilities for counter-hegemonic resistance to the way that neoliberalism is facilitated by discourses. To be clear, I am not endorsing a simple pluralistic approach to situating Black youth in job training policy discourses. I am suggesting a new system founded upon the recognition that Black youth are situated in a system of classification that, as Snaza and Mishra-Tarc (2019) writes, "systematically dismembers human beings." It is

only through this recognition that "we might chart new terms of our own making" (p. 2). As Wynter (1992) states,

> The starving [jobless] fella, the global new poor or *les damnes*, Fanon pointed out, does not have to inquire into the Truth. He is, they are, the Truth. It is we who institute "this Truth." We must now undo their narratively condemned status. (p. 70)

Categories like opportunity youth are inextricably linked to "the performative enactment of the Western world system's degrees of domination/subordination" (McKittrick, 2015, p. 40). Categories that are shaped by race and class are necessary for the westernized enactment of neoliberal *homo-economicus*, or the rational notion that "self-interest is the primary human motive in all transactions" (Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019, p. 63). Understanding this process enables the deconstruction of deficit narratives, categories, and classifications as an anti-colonial struggle, or one that might be the "truest challenge to a violent world order in their attempt to overturn not just economic domination through labor but also the dominance of Western man" (Serynada, 2015, para. 10).

Embed 'Belonging' Into Job Training Initiatives

A deep sense of belonging in the formation of job training initiatives that serve Black youth should also be central to the reconstruction of a new system. According to powell and Menendian (2016),

> Belonging is the most important good we distribute in society, as it is prior to and informs all other distributive decisions. We must support the creation of structures of inclusion that recognize and accommodate difference, rather than seek to erase it. We need practices that create voice without denying our deep interrelationship. Widening the

> circle of human concern involves "humanizing the other," where negative representations and stereotypes are challenged and rejected. It is a process by which the most marginalized outgroups are brought into the center of our concern through higher order love—the Beloved Community that Dr. King envisioned. (para. 61)

An example of how we might create a sense of belonging is by inviting Black youth to lead in the design and development of public policy that seeks to improve their economic condition, thus abolishing the current hierarchy that places the voices of powerful corporations and their coalitions above all others. Institutionalizing belonging in job training policies and programs invites perspectives that demand a more critical, democratic and responsive system structured around the needs of the directly-impacted. Decision-makers must develop counter-hegemonic "spaces where people can meet to share common dreams and hopes, to understand and respect differences, and to look out for the interests of others" (Reid, 2005, p. 287). Spaces that promote belonging and invite the political participation of Black youth are critical places for developing a sense of shared responsibility and are connected across physical, cultural, and political boundaries (Baldridge, 2014). For example, it would be unique to invite youth to develop their own state plan for workforce development.

Inject Critical Pedagogy into Opportunity Youth Policies and Programs

In *Economizing Education*, Spring (2015) expressed concerns that an imbalance that places the needs of employers above the needs of greater society prevents education and training programs from promoting critical thinking and develops a culture of workers who are at higher risk of corporate exploitation. In a review of neoliberal work-ready testing policies, Lakes (2008) quotes Terry Wrigley, who states that "times have changed, but the basic principle remains:

Capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on" (p. 332).

As this study finds, neoliberal discourses legitimize the notion that youth lack basic skills for employability making them the perfect vessels to mold into human capital through neoliberal job training programs and policies (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Lakes, 2008; Spring, 2015; Weaver, 2019; Lardier, 2020). However, job training or career education sites can be places where critical pedagogy is used. It is possible for Black youth who participate in job training programs to have experiences that simultaneously help them recognize corporate exploitation and racial injustice and reengage them in pathways that embrace critical learning and economic justice.

A growing community of scholars have agreed that shifting discourse, practice, and policy towards critical pedagogy is essential for countering the racial-neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2009) processes that currently drive programs and policies serving Black youth (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Baldridge, 2014; Casey, 2016). For the Atlanta youth who are out of school and out of work, alternative education training and vocational programs can be crucial sites for disrupting neoliberal discourses (Lakes, 1994; Hayes, Steinberg, & Tobin, 2011; Kincheloe, 2018). For example, Kirschner (2006) observed the participation of youth in a youth-centered apprenticeship program that focused on building speaking, social problem definition, and community organizing skills. His findings suggest that the critical skill development practices deployed by youth-workers in the program fight traditional meritocratic values and facilitate "meaningful and competent participation by young people" (p. 54).

Allman et al. (2005) argue that "the key to resistance, in our view, is to develop a revolutionary critical pedagogy that will enable the working class to discover how the use-value of their labor-power is being exploited by capital but also how working class initiative and power

can destroy this type of determination and force a recomposition of class relations by directly confronting capital in all of its multifaceted dimensions" (p. 22). Discourses within the opportunity youth initiative must resist efforts to undermine the power and agency of Black youth. Critical pedagogy, when applied to job training and policy discourses, may enable new spaces where job training plays a disruptive role in the creation of a new and powerful conscious class of youth and young adults prepared to push back on the exploitation of the careers they are disproportionately being trained to take on (Baldridge, 2014; Casey, 2016; Zatz, 2020).

Cooperative Economics as Counter-Hegemony

Continuing the theme of resisting colonial practices and adopting the use of critical pedagogies, opportunity youth initiatives should consider opportunities to advance Black cooperative economics. Cooperative economics pushes the discursive web outside of the realm of concern focused almost exclusively on human capital needs (i.e. soft skills) and corporate profits/productivity. Black cooperative economics are a counter-neoliberal strategy used to move Black communities collectively toward shared prosperity despite public disinvestment and dispossession of social services, products, and other needs that the public or private sectors fail to deliver (Nembhard, 2014). Calling out the mainstream economy for failing Black America by pushing Black citizens to accept a capitalistic vision for individual wealth, W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for solidarity within the Black community to build economic power (Nembhard, 2014).

Nearly a century later, Du Bois's vision of cooperative economics is still understood as a potential path to wealth creation among Black Americans (Nembhard, 2014). In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives released a *Vision for Black Lives: Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice*. This vision provides six categories of demands including a call to end the

war on “Black people, economic justice, reparations, invest-divest from institutions causing harm to the diaspora, and all people, re-prioritize community control, and invest in platforms for Black people to acquire political power” (Movement for Black Lives, 2016).

Under the economic justice category, there is an explicit call for reparations in the form of transformative and redistributive economic practices, such as cooperatives, to be publicly and privately funded (2016). Robin G. Kelley cautions us, though, to be careful on about how Black communities demand and acquire new capital to support alternative economic development in neoliberal regimes. In Kelley’s book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, he urges the following:

> The hard work of changing our values and reorganizing social life requires political engagement, community involvement, education, debate and discussion, and dreaming. Money and resources cannot be bought. And without at least a rudimentary critique of the capitalist culture that consumes us, even reparations can have disastrous consequences. (2002, p. 133)

Kelley’s words underscore the importance of educating Black youth about alternative and counter-hegemonic forms of economic empowerment and wealth creation rather than just employment, which includes a return to Du Bois’s pan-Africanist cooperative economics (Nembhard, 2014). Without this education, and with only the neoliberal aspirations imposed on youth by stakeholders within the opportunity youth initiative, we may see an increase in wealth extraction rather than wealth and asset creation in Black communities (Nembhard, 2014).

In practice, this would look like stakeholders incorporating discourses that allow Black youth to look beyond the self and develop solutions to pressing challenges within their own communities (King, 2005; Nembhard, 2009). Youth should be given opportunities to create their

own employment opportunities instead of being driven to work for corporations. As the expansion of neoliberal governmentality in the daily lives of Black youth continues to limit participation in collective action for community organizing and social justice (Goldberg, 2009; Dumas, 2016), it is more critical than ever to incorporate cooperative strategies as an alternative to the current dominant neoliberal practices that advance exploitation.

Maintain a Critical View of Opportunity Youth Policy

The possibilities for an alternative approach I describe above are visionary. Fundamentally caution must always be given to policy discourse efforts that attempt to increase the employment outcomes of youth in the context of neoliberalism. Job training systems are built on capitalism, and any system that is developed on this foundation risks the further exploitation of Black youth in the economy (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Zatz, 2020). I share the critical views of James Baldwin in his 1968 *How to Cool It* interview, where he was asked if job training programs work:

> You know what this country really means when it says on-the-job training programs is not what they are teaching Negroes [sic] skills, though there's that, too; what they're afraid of is that when the Negro [sic] comes into the factory, into the union, when he comes, in fact, into the American institution, he will change these institutions because no Negro [sic] in this country really lives by American middle-class standards. That's why they pick up half-dozen Negroes [sic] here and there, and polish them up, polish them off, and put them in some ass-hole college someplace, and expect those cats to be able to go back to the streets and cool the other cats. They can't. The price in this country to survive at all still is to become a white man. More and more people are refusing to become a white man. That's the bottom of what they mean by on-the-job training. They mean they

> want to fit you in. And furthermore, let's tell it like it is. The American white man does not really want to have autonomous Negro [sic] male anywhere near him. (para. 4)

Baldwin's critique of job training is underscored by the discursive web I analyzed in this study. We need a radical restructuring of the current system. I envision a system that demands that *all* employers pay living wages, offer good benefits such as paid leave and affordable health care, and promote collective bargaining in exchange for labor. This is a system that recognizes that nearly 400 years of anti-Black politics and public policy in the United States has mired the economy with an unequal distribution of opportunity for Black youth in K-12 education, higher education, employment, housing, health care, and many of other domains of everyday life (Hall, 2013; Reed, 2018). A new reconstructed system should prioritize the experiences of Black youth, rather than operate as a race-neutral, apolitical and neoliberal arm of government and corporate America.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many directions that future research may go in order to further unearth how the discursive web in this study produces material effects in the lives of opportunity youth. While this study deploys a critical discourse analysis of documents and select media, a more critical approach might include an interview-based study in partnership with Black opportunity youth. When I first proposed this study, interviews were a major component of the methodology. I designed a qualitative study that sought to understand the experiences of Black youth in WIOA-funded job training programs. However, that approach was revised when the Coronavirus pandemic began to impact us all, including the youth themselves. As a result of strict social distancing laws and out of respect for the fact that these youth were experiencing intensified economic hardship due to the pandemic recession, I chose to modify the study and focus more

intently on the analysis of neoliberal discourse. Thankfully, this allowed me as the researcher to go deep in one direction. However, I do not believe the gravity of the effects of neoliberalism in the discursive web plays in shaping the experiences of Black youth can ever be known without hearing directly from them.

The aim of a future qualitative study should be to understand what the world is like, in this case, as a young Black person in an out-of-school, federally-funded job training program. Researchers should use interviews to reveal subjective experiences of the participants (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2007). In interview settings, the participant "can be perceived as the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their story" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 59). Little attention is given to how the context, of the world in which the participant lives, influences or shapes those experiences (Husserl, 1970; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Given the role that the discursive web plays in reducing self-agency and constructing negative perceptions, it is important to deploy open-ended methods that allow Black opportunity youth to share rich descriptions of their experience.

The neoliberal framework used in this research requires an examination of the complex relationship between structural racism and political economy. This study focused explicitly on the implications of neoliberalism for Black youth, who are considered an oppressed group in our society (Baldridge, 2014; Dumas, 2016). A brief historical analysis can reveal the myriad ways interpersonal, structural, and institutional racism have impacted Black youth. Therefore, it is necessary that future studies of opportunity youth continue to apply a critical hermeneutic tradition in the methodology.

As mentioned above, qualitative studies explore how a participant's lifeworld shapes their experiences. Lifeworld relates to the social and political context, as well as the common

everyday experiences that inform the creation of meaning (Lopez & Willis, 2004). While researchers should not assume that Black youth are oppressed individuals, they should lead with a critical hermeneutic approach so they may reveal and engage any oppressive factors that are part of the experience. By doing so, researchers create space for oppressed voices to be heard should they exist in the data.

Another potential direction for future research would be to explore the experience of job training staff. They play a significant role in implementing programs and policies that impact opportunity youth, and it would be helpful to know if they play any role in resisting the dominant discourses that exist in the web. Doing so would also address other questions that emerge from the conceptual framework. Organizations that employ job training staff that serve opportunity youth as clients can either prevent or advance harmful discourses about Black youth. The staff at these organizations may play a substantial role in resisting hegemonic discourses that impact Black youth.

As this study shows, Black youth are negatively constructed within the opportunity youth discursive web through pathologizing discourses exchanged by stakeholders. In her studies of youth participation in after school programs, Baldridge (2014) found that places outside of the school building that employ staff as youth workers are important sites of contestation. Baldridge (2014) found that "[deficit] narratives not only establish a particular understanding of youth of color, but they also shape the public's understanding of who is in need of after school programming and what that programming should look like" (p. 445). I contend that this phenomena may also extend to youth employment initiatives where youth workers provide coaching and training in a non-school environment. In an ethnographic study of youth workers, Baldridge (2014) found that youth workers would find ways to reject and reframe the deficit

discourses of Black youth. This reframing not only contributed to the ways that the workers approached the youth and fostered staff-youth relationships, but also found that reframing youth as asset-rich contributed to the redevelopment of curriculum and hiring of staff who brought with them asset-based frames (2014).

Future research should also explore the larger role of community-based, youth-serving organizations that operate as the implementers of opportunity youth programs. As the discursive web shows, it is presumed that youth who are not in school or not in employment are engaged in unhealthy behaviors, but school and jobs are not the only interventions that Black youth seek when they are out of school and unemployed. I am also familiar with spaces in the community that serve as safe spaces for Black youth to engage with one another outside the classroom or in employment. These are spaces without preconceived fears of hyper-surveillance and punishment and places where Black youth are not reduced to their economic value in job training. Not only has research found that participation in community-based programs may lead to connection and re-engagement in school, but they have also been linked to the socio-emotional well-being of Black youth (Posner & Vandell, 1994; Baldridge, 2014).

Perhaps one of the most urgent next steps for research is the analysis of policy discourses that have emerged during the Coronavirus pandemic. When I started writing this dissertation, I never would have imagined that the world would be impacted by a deadly, global pandemic. In the year 2020, the world was changed by a virus, COVID-19, that has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in the United States. At the time of writing this very sentence, there is still no cure for the virus, only a vaccine that is slowly becoming accessible. What is more, the virus has exploded economic hardship for Black Americans who are disproportionately infected and killed by the virus (Millet, Jones, & Benkeser, 2020).

As a result of the virus and state-ordered requirements that businesses close to avoid the spread of the disease, millions of people have been laid off from employment in a matter of months. The coronavirus compounded economic hardship in Atlanta, increasing the number of households with very little income or no income at all. As of September 2020, nearly 800,000 people in Georgia were filing unemployment insurance benefits every week, with Black youth and adults overrepresented in those numbers. According to the Federal Reserve Bank (2020), the youth unemployment rate reached 44 percent. During this time, eviction filings have increased across the country and food insecurity has spiked, particularly among children. Economic recovery is already proving to be slowest for Black and Latinx people who entered into the pandemic-recession with the least amount of financial support, such as emergency savings (Camardelle, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately disrupted the livelihoods and economic stability for opportunity youth. Prior to the crisis, youth and young adults accounted for approximately 25 percent of the low wage workforce (Bird and West-Bey, 2020). Young workers already faced greater difficulty with achieving financial stability before the crisis, and now the financial downturn caused by COVID-19 will make it more difficult for youth wrestling with systemic barriers to find meaningful work opportunities that pay livable wages (Bird & West-Bey, 2020).

Additionally, the labor market has become an even greater free-for-all for corporations. In this year, corporations used their lobbying power to take advantage of the health crisis to limit the protections they offer workers. During the summer of 2020, Georgia's legislature passed a law that shielded corporations from liability if they were sued for getting workers sick on the job. Additionally, Georgia was one of the first states to reopen prematurely, as cases and death rates

were on the rise, creating an environment where leaders can blame the failure of opportunity youth to find employment on their own laziness rather than a fear of contracting the virus and potentially dying (Steffenson, 2020). Future research should take stock of the way this pandemic is expanding neoliberalism and offer critiques of how youth are situated in this new and increasingly anti-worker, anti-Black public health crisis.

Conclusion

In 1989, Economists Richard Freeman and Harry Holzer published *The Black Youth Employment Crisis*. This widely cited report characterized the lack of Black youth in employment at the time as "catastrophic" (p. 3). The authors go as far to say that "the urban unemployment characteristic of Third World countries appears to have taken root among black youths in the United States" (p. 3). Thirty-three years later, this study illustrates that while racial and economic conditions may have improved, the dominant discourse about Black youth in the job training discourse have not changed much. The discourse may have taken a more stealth turn, by shifting the language to describe out-of-school youth from at-risk youth, to disadvantaged youth, to opportunity youth. The absence of concern in the discourse regarding persistent racial discrimination in education and the labor market despite equal opportunity protections in the law remains completely relevant today.

Employment and education have always been viewed as popular pathways to economic and social mobility. It is a commonly held belief that employment is the primary factor in one's success since employment can lead to income. But that belief is mediated by other factors that are often ignored in policies and programs that attempt to improve the employability of individuals, particularly Black youth. In conclusion, this study illustrated that neoliberal job

training policies and the associated discourses that shape the social world for opportunity youth may actually facilitate an illusion of opportunity.

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