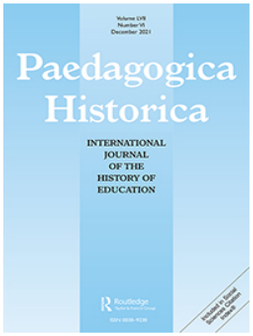

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A rising tide of discontent: mediocrity, meritocracy, and neoliberalism in American education, 1971–1983

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ABSTRACT

Mediocrity as a concept in education has frequently been used by modern-day and historical actors to express discontent with the status quo of pedagogy and schooling. Despite its pervasiveness in discourse, however, the concept has largely evaded academic scrutiny, particularly in terms of its historical development in the years leading up to its appearance in the famous United States Government report, *A Nation at Risk*. This paper aims to construct a conceptual history of mediocrity in American education through the analysis of newspaper articles from *The New York Times*, to explore how the concept developed amidst the rise of neoliberalism and meritocratic discourse in education. This study finds that the concept of mediocrity between 1971 and 1983 had a number of nuanced conceptualisations and played a pivotal role in developing meritocratic discourse on natural talent and ability, as well as neoliberal and marketised narratives in public debates over educational equality, business approaches to education, and performance pay for teachers. These findings allow educational researchers to reflect meaningfully on the ways that language shapes, and is shaped by, historical developments in education, and provides layers of meaning and context to oft-used educational concepts that are crucial for the authentic evaluation of our modern education systems.

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Introduction

Few charges are considered as damning to an educator, a school, or an education system as to be considered "mediocre". The concept of mediocrity has been a common synonym in education for "low quality", "stagnation", or even the "failure" of an entire system, and is used by educationalists, journalists, and politicians alike to express discontent with the status quo of pedagogy and schooling.[1] Particularly in meritocratic societies such as the United States, mediocrity has been consistently used to deride seemingly ineffectual policies and practices in schools, from progressive and democratic educational reforms, to higher education, and even educational equality. The prevalence of mediocrity as a concept in American education today is largely the result of the term's appearance in *A Nation at Risk*, a national report released by the United States Department of Education in 1983. This report, mired in

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[1]Chelsea A. Rodriguez, "Times of Discontent: A Conceptual History of Mediocrity in Education, 1963–1983" (Master's thesis, KU Leuven, 2020).

apocalyptic rhetoric, charged that the United States' international standing and supremacy was being eroded by a "rising tide of mediocrity" in its schooling system, and claimed that the only way to get the country back on track was to push for accountability and neoliberal reforms in American education.[2] But why, above all other possible descriptors, was mediocrity chosen as the most undesirable descriptor? And, even more importantly, what does it even mean to be mediocre in American education? Before we can really grapple with the former question, we must gain clarity on the latter; thus, this paper aims to determine the meaning(s) of mediocrity by constructing a conceptual history through the analysis of newspaper articles on education, in order to juxtapose the concept with contemporary discourses on meritocratic and neoliberal education policies prior to 1983.

As a concept in education, mediocrity has largely eluded academic scrutiny; the question of definition has almost never explicitly been dealt with, particularly from a historical perspective. One modern attempt at definition by educationalist Abellardo Villereal demonstrates the complexity of the concept, but also hints at deeper historical and contextual elements that have contributed to the concept's construction in education: to him, mediocrity is the "paralysis of an education institution that maintains the status quo regardless of its effectiveness, is content with its limited capacity to produce excellence, believes that improvement is out of reach, and masquerades itself as excellence".[3] As a result, some academic scholarship itself has made use of the term mediocrity to push a narrative of a broken American schooling system,[4] or to formulate a criticism against critical pedagogies in their struggle for reform and social justice.[5] What all demonstrate, however, is that mediocrity (like many other educational concepts) is commonly used with an assumption of consensus, making it all too easy for nuanced meanings, implications, and intentions behind its use to be obscured. Research into the development of educational concepts in newspapers, specifically, has been sparse, but its potential has been epitomised by Patrick J. Devlieger's study on the discursive development of "Handicap" and education in the *New York Times*, which demonstrated how power and social constructs in education could be embodied through the use of particular language.[6] The discursive relationship between newspapers and education in general has seen more attention in recent decades, particularly when it comes to discursive framing of teachers,[7] and the influence of print media on the formation, debate, and acceptance of educational policies.[8]

[2]United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: Department of Education, 1983), 3.

[3]Abelardo Villareal, "Strengthening Schools' 'Immune Systems' to Fight Mediocrity and Failure," *IDRA Newsletter*, https://www.idra.org/resource-center/strengthening-schools-immune-systems-to-fight-mediocrity-and-failure/ (January 2006, Accessed Nov 8, 2021).

[4]See, for instance: Katherine Baird, *Trapped in Mediocrity: Why Our Schools Aren't World-Class and What We Can Do about It* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); and Cheri Piersen Yecke, "The War against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools," (Lanham, MD: R&L Education, 2007).

[5]See: Peter Mayo, "On Mediocrity in Education and Politics," *World and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 1 (2013): 88–9, where he argues that Paolo Freire's and Antonio Gramsci's philosophies of social justice had failed to emancipate the downtrodden from mediocrity.

[6]Patrick J. Devlieger, "'Handicap' and Education in the United States of the 1930s: Discursive Formations in the *New York Times*," *Paedagogica Historica* 37, no. 2 (January 2001): 278–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/0030923010370201.

[7]See: Jennifer L. Cohen, "Teachers in the News: A Critical Analysis of One US Newspaper's Discourse on Education, 2006–2007," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31, no. 1 (February 2010): 105–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300903465450 and Matt Reichel, "Teachers Movements in the Circuits of Communication: From Crisis to Contestation," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 5 (20 October 2018): 483–502, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2018.1503416.

[8]See: Michelle L. Stack, "Spin as Symbolic Capital: The Fields of Journalism and Education Policy-making," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 13, no. 2 (2010): 107–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120903121721; Hilda T. A. Amsing, Linda Greveling and Jeroen J. H. Dekker, "The Struggle for Comprehensive Education in the

While *A Nation at Risk* – as a "hallmark" of the recent history of American education – and the general period of change leading up to its publication have received considerable scholarly attention, most historical studies have not taken language, itself, as a focus of study and analysis. In *Tinkering Towards Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, David Tyack and Larry Cuban largely characterise the decade leading up to the report as being embroiled in tensions between "progress and regress"[9] in education, and emblematic of changing expectations and perceptions of the United States' public school system. While they do make note of the recurring tendency for "vague" words to become "vogue" words in education discourse,[10] they stop short of analysing the role of concepts and language in informing, and reflecting, historical developments in education. Similarly, Diane Ravitch takes the neoliberal corporate-reform movement to task in her book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatisation Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. In her argumentation, she explores how the concept of reform in the 1970s was co-opted by corporate reformers in order to push crisis narratives in American education, thus presenting privatisation policies as more favourable to a misinformed public.[11] Much like Tyack and Cuban, however, Ravitch's research focus is less concerned with conceptual history and more with social changes and policy debates in American education, though she has recently co-authored a book with Nancy E. Bailey, which aimed to decipher educational concepts and provide nuanced definitions, signalling the potential and relevance of such research pursuits to contemporary academia.[12] Additionally, while there have been multiple studies on the factors that have contributed to decentralisation and marketisation in education, these studies have often failed to adopt a historical perspective.[13]

These historical scholarship gaps on the implications and history of concepts in education generate a wealth of yet unanswered questions. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the meanings of mediocrity in American education that took shape in public discourse between 1971 and 1983; what meaning(s) did mediocrity and its related (counter-)concepts embody in news coverage of educational issues in the *New York Times*? And what role did the concept play in facilitating different educational debates leading up to the release of *A Nation at Risk*? To properly construct this complex history, this study is organised in several sections. Following this introduction, the second section introduces the primary sources for this paper and situates this study within the framework of conceptual history. While it is beyond our intention to trace the concept's origins in educational discourse, a third section sketches a broader picture for readers of how

Netherlands: The Representation of Secondary School Innovation in Dutch Newspaper Articles in the 1970s," *History of Education* 42, no. 4 (2013): 460–85, doi: 10.1080/0046760X.2013.795612; and Joakim Landahl, "De-Scandalisation and International Assessments: The Reception of IEA Surveys in Sweden during the 1970s," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 16, no. 5 (20 October 2018): 566–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2018.1531235.

[9]David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Towards Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14

[10]Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering Towards Utopia*, 80.

[11]Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatisation Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

[12]Diane Ravitch and Nancy E. Bailey, *EdSpeak and Doubletalk: A Glossary to Decipher Hypocrisy and Save Public Schooling* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2019).

[13]See for instance, Lisbeth Lundahl, Inger Erixon Arreman, Ann-Sofie Holm and Ulf Lundström, "Educational Marketization the Swedish Way," *Education Inquiry* 4, no. 3 (2013): 497–517; Ning Rong Liu, *Decentralisation and Marketisation: The Changing Landscape of China's Adult and Continuing Education. Education in a Competitive and Globalising World* (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc, 2010). 16(5), 566–76.

mediocrity has been used to advocate or criticise educational reforms in the immediate period before the time demarcation of this study. This discussion further contextualises our empirical study into the conceptualisations of mediocrity and its role in facilitating public debates over education in the *New York Times* between 1971 and 1983, which constitutes the fourth section. Our empirical investigation concludes with a brief discussion of the findings, implications, and importance of this study in the broader context of educational history.

Methodology: conceptual history, public discourse, and digital archives

While there are many methods to explore historical developments from a language-centred approach, this paper is theoretically underpinned by a conceptual history research method, which aims to study cultural shifts by examining how the meanings of (social and political) concepts change over time.[14] Emphasis on the analysis of both counter-concepts and synchronous analysis (i.e. the analysis of concepts in relation to other concepts or ideas) is crucial for a thorough investigation of mediocrity, as there is far more research on what mediocrity *is definitely not* than what it *might actually be*. The concept of mediocrity never stands alone and is often portrayed as the antithesis of excellence and the bedfellow of stagnation. Critically, concepts in "constitutive opposition" must be analysed together, particularly when they exhibit exceptionally ambiguous or self-referential meanings.[15]

As sources, we analysed digitised newspaper articles from the *New York Times*(NYT) that used the concept of mediocrity to discuss developments in the American education system between 1971 and 1983. As newspapers are written not only to inform but also to "influence, mislead and entertain",[16] for historians they constitute public arenas of contestation and knowledge production that provide valuable insight into how dominant social and political views at the time were publicly negotiated.[17] We chose to analyse articles from the NYT, specifically, because it is considered a major newspaper of record[18] in the United States, and has digitised nearly all its published materials from 1851 through to 2002. Thanks to its comprehensive and accessible digital archive, we were able to conduct a keyword search of the entire collection, including articles, letters to the editors, book reviews, and special reports, which were published between 1971 and 1983 and included both keywords "Education" and "Mediocrity". We elected not to analyse articles published after *A Nation at Risk* was released (27 April 1983), as the appearance of mediocrity in this national policy document demonstrably altered its conceptualisation, and substantially increased the rate of use of mediocrity in the public sphere.[19]

[14]Niels Akerstrom Andersen, *Discursive Analytical Strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2003), 54.
[15]Anderson, *Discursive Analytical Strategies*, 38.
[16]John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London: Routledge, 2015), 78–9.
[17]L. Amber Roessner, "The Voices of Public Opinion: Lingering Structures of Feeling about Women's Suffrage in 1917 U.S. Newspaper Letters to the Editor," *Journalism History* 46, no. 2 (2 April 2020): 124–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2020.1724588.
[18]As defined by media historian Shannon E. Martin in *Newspapers of Record in a Digital Age: From Hot Type to Hot Link* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), a "Newspaper of Record" is a major newspaper with large circulation whose editorial and news-gathering functions are considered authoritative; these papers are considered to meet higher standards of journalism, have independent editorial boards, and are renowned internationally for consistent and reliable reporting.
[19]Rodriguez, "Times of Discontent," 32.

The initial keyword search resulted in the collection of 43 articles, advertisements, and letters to the editor. These collected sources were read extensively and further vetted based on specific exclusion criteria: (1) mediocrity had to be directed specifically towards the American education system or one of its key actors or institutions (i.e. students, teachers, universities), (2) the article had to be discussing the state of education on a national scale and/or be attempting to nationalise local issues in education to track national trends in discourse, and (3) articles must have been distributed to readers nationwide, rather than published only in local editions of the NYT. Ultimately, 22 articles, advertisements, and letters were analysed to examine how mediocrity served both to describe and to inform various reforms, changes, and public debates over the American education system.

The chosen time demarcation coincides with a noteworthy period in American educational history, as it followed and corresponded with a series of systemic societal changes that would structurally alter the education system in the United States.[20] Civil Rights advocates worked with the federal government and its bureaucratic arms in the 1960s and 1970s to bring de facto school segregation to an end, granting expanded access and levelling the educational playing field for millions of students of colour while also solidifying the increased involvement of the federal government in the affairs of public education.[21] In terms of educational policy concerning students of different abilities, gender, race, and spoken language, the United States seemingly stood on the precipice of a shining, new era of educational equality and opportunity by the mid-1970s; and yet, by 1983, dominant narratives characterised these equalisation efforts as ineffective and monetarily wasteful, and instead advocated for a more marketised, neoliberal approach to educational success.[22] Neoliberalism emerged in as a discursive force by the early 1980s, arguing that the welfare state and public-service model of education significantly lowered educational quality for all students, and promoted privatisation and free-market policies to best support individual students' success.[23] Hence, exploration of this time period sheds light on how the direction of American public education shifted, in some ways rather abruptly, in its course, and how public discourses on education may have reflected this shift.

American education in crisis? Mediocrity in twentieth-century discourse

In the decades prior to our time-period of focus, mediocrity was regularly used to critique and deride the American education system. The prevalent use of this charged concept is not surprising, given that the decade saw two monumental, socially transformative events occur in American education: the end of de facto school segregation with *Brown*v. *Board of Education* in 1954, and the passing of the National Defence Education Act in 1958 in response to the growing technological power of the Soviet Union.[24] The social, international, and economic impacts of the cold war between the Soviet Union and United States

[20]Ben Brodinsky, "Something Happened: Education in the Seventies," *Phi Delta Kappan* 61, no. 4 (1979): 238–41, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20385422 (accessed 26 April 2021).
[21]Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 1–4; Brodinsky 238–9.
[22]David Hursh, "Assessing No Child Left Behind and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies," *American Educational Research Journal* 44, no. 3 (September 2007): 493–518, at495.
[23]Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).<<typesetter: please remove shading from this reference note>>
[24]Jim Wynter Porter, "The Entanglement of Racism and Individualism: The U.S. National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Individualization of 'Intelligence' and Educational Policy," *Multiethnica*,No.38, 2018: 3.

resulted in a pervasive anxiety that American supremacy was under threat, an anxiety that was summarily projected onto America's schools.[25] Progressive educationalists and educational policies that had characterised American education for the previous five decades were blamed for failing to mould the type of citizens who could continue to demonstrate American excellence in all subjects and industries on the international stage.[26] In particular, discursive emphasis at this time was placed on exceptional *individuals*, a practice that saw race, intelligence, and ability become entangled in public debates over schooling reform.[27] Mediocrity appeared frequently in these discourses, helping critics paint the present progressive education as outdated and out of touch with the technological and national needs of the United States in this new era.

For example, historian and educator Alfred Bestor Jr argued in 1954 that the promotion of "life skills" in schools over intellectual pursuits was "dooming our children to an intellectual mediocrity and . . .sterility",[28] a claim that he resolutely defended in front of a crowd of angry parents and educationalists at the 1954 National Education Association (NEA) Conference.[29] Later that year, in *The Diminished Mind: A Study of Planned Mediocrity in Our Public Schools*, writer and educationalist Mortimer B. Smith repeatedly used the concept of mediocrity in his criticisms of the American education system. A NYT book review of *The Diminished Mind* explained how Smith "believes that . . . our public high schools are committed not to education as it used to be understood, but to a silly and dangerous kind of nurse-maiding of the retarded, the mediocre, and the uneducable".[30] As this quotation illustrates, mediocrity was, at least in some extreme cases, not only conceptualised as (a result of) a poor education system, but equally as a typecast of lesser individuals whom schools were unable to educate. Similar criticisms of the public schooling system would come in 1955 with the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read – and What You Can Do About It*, a best-selling critique of literacy education by readability expert Rudolf Flesch.[31] Although he never explicitly uses the term mediocrity, his line of argumentation against contemporary methods of teaching literacy runs parallel to some of the accusations against the schooling system discussed earlier.

Furthermore, the mass influx of the baby-boomer generation into America's universities in the 1960s saw mediocrity used to characterise an ensuing "crisis" in higher education. Universities that failed to adapt to changing student demographics, class sizes, and modern needs for academia were labelled as mediocre, and encouraged to change their practices, structures, and curriculum in order to survive the new competitive market in higher education.[32] Private universities, particularly those that resisted opening up to more students in an effort to preserve prestige and elite status, faced financial ruin and closures as they were

[25]Kathleen Anderson Steeves et al., "Transforming American Educational Identity after Sputnik," *American Educational History Journal* 36, no. 1–2 (2009): 71.
[26]Wiebe, "The Social Function," 156.
[27]Porter, "The Entanglement of Racism and Individualism," 3–4.
[28]Cited in Benjamin Fine, "Critics of Schools get Sharp Rebuff: Teachers and Parents Give them No Comfort at N.E.A. Convention Meeting," *New York Times*, 30 June 1954.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Dudley Fitts, "Wanting: The Three R's. The Diminished Mind: A Study of Planned Mediocrity in Our Public Schools. By Mortimer Smith," *New York Times*, 24 October 1954.
[31]Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read – And What You Can Do About It* (New York: Herpar Publishing, 1955).
[32]Rodriguez, "Times of Discontent," 38–42.

out-competed by accessible, fast-growing state universities.[33] At the same time, there was also concern that universities were propagating mediocrity by changing *too much*, supposedly abandoning their academic focus and rigour in favour of unacademic, popular liberal education reforms. Big state universities were growing and changing so rapidly that some educators warned they were on track to become "sprawling monsters of mediocrity mistakenly called 'universities'", with little academic clout.[34]

In general, the concept of what the university should be in modern America changed dramatically in the 1960s, as the American university was being called upon to provide education to more and more diverse students, while simultaneously finding solutions to a growing number of problems in American society.[35] Students protesting against racial and gender inequality in higher education, as well as the US involvement in the Vietnam War, challenged the authority of the university and began to stage massive student strikes to call for systemic change.[36] Educators began to fear that unrest was causing the nation to lose sight of the ultimate purpose of higher education: academic pursuit. Responding to student protestors in 1969, University Chancellor Samuel Gould of New York warned that "the centrality of scholarship in university life must not be shifted, lest we ultimately find ourselves settling for universal intellectual mediocrity".[37] After the killing of student protestors by the National Guard at Kent State University in the spring of 1970, a massive student strike brought higher education to a standstill. Millions of students on 900 college campuses across the country clashed with authorities and burned down government-affiliated academic buildings. The protests escalated to such a degree that it led then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to famously remark that it felt as if "the very fabric of government was falling apart".[38] Gradually tensions eased, and as a new decade began Americans largely hoped to move on from the conflict that dominated its campuses. The focus was now firmly locked on the future, in an attempt to move past the educational and social struggles of the past; however, the concept of mediocrity would not be left behind, and would continue to find its place in public discourse during this "new era" of education in the United States.

Intellectual wasteland: mediocrity and egalitarianism

As the NYT covered developments in education in the early 1970s, mediocrity was used to characterise debates over equality, opportunity, and excellence in education. On 19 March 1972, a short opinion piece appeared in the Education section of the NYT titled "The Gentleman's A". The title, a play on words, refers to the concept of

[33]Reflecting on the bankruptcy of several private universities in Pennsylvania in 1965, NYT Chief editor of Education summarised the issue quite simply: "The tougher the competition (and for the good of the country this is a highly desirable contest) the more difficult the position for the private institutions. Mediocrity is fatal. Rapid upgrading is costly." Fred M. Hechinger, "Help for the Private College," *New York Times*, 12 March 1967.

[34]Francis C. Horn, "Campus in Crisis: The Contemporary University USA Edited by Robert S. Morrison," *New York Times*, 8 January 1967.

[35]Horn, "Campus in Crisis."

[36]Amanda Miller, "May 1970 Student Anti-War Strikes," Mapping American Social Movements in the 20th Century, http://depts.washington.edu/moves/antiwar_may1970.shtml (accessed 12 October 2020)

[37]Samuel B. Gould, "Excerpts from 3 Lectures by Chancellor of State University on 'The Academic Condition'," *New York Times*, 23 September 1969.

[38]J. E. Eichsteadt, "Shut it Down": The May 1970 National Student Strike at the University of California at Berkeley, Syracuse University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison" (Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 2007), 3.

a "Gentleman's C" in higher education: a passing grade granted to students of wealthy parents in lieu of a more accurate failing grade, usually to appease their parents who tended to be donors or alumni of the school. According to the editorial board of the NYT, the expansion of access to education had resulted in popular egalitarianism replacing the upper class as the primary culprit in the subversion of merit; simultaneously demanding not just access, but also high achievement from all students, seemed to present an emerging problem in American education: "Are today's young people that much smarter? Nobody, except their own parents and politicians on the stump, is ready to swear to this. More likely … the egalitarian spirit has given the hard-marking professor a bad name. Meritocracy unfair to organised mediocrity."[39]

Mediocrity is positioned here as the opposite of meritocracy; a counter-concept to hard work, natural talent, and ability. How can hard-marking teachers expect to cope, when all students are expected to achieve regardless of their individual merit (or lack thereof)? While meritocracy had long characterised American discourse on education, meritocratic ideals played a motivating role in the equalising efforts of the 1960s, particularly to challenge endemic elitism and exclusion in higher education. But the duality of merit allowed for a shift in narrative, and saw public discourse on education gradually distance from the promise of individual merit to place emphasis on individual liability for failure.[40] In this way, however, society slowly absolved itself of any responsibility in an individual's success or academic well-being: individual responsibility in this sense isolates the individual from the conditions of their experience, perpetuating the assertion that people who cannot access education, who are not financially successful, or who are not able to rise above their current stations, have only themselves to blame.[41] In a similar vein, the author(s) of the opinion piece questioned the fact that more and more students were getting into college, but far fewer were failing; such a phenomenon is illogical from a meritocratic perspective, where competition dictates the necessity of winners and losers. If everyone succeeds and is exceptional, then no one can really be successful, because the very concept necessitates a lack of success from one's competitors in order to be achieved. The focus on equal opportunity, it seemed, was resulting in a society where opportunity trumped talent and skill, blurring the line that demarcated those who were truly intelligent, skilled, gifted, or successful, from those who were merely average (or, even, unworthy).

This narrative, that the expansion of access to education would undermine the recognition of natural talent due to the "egalitarian spirit", reappeared just a few months later in another article on challenges in higher education written by William V. Shannon. Titled "The New Barbarians", Shannon argued that professors and colleges were fleeing from their "intellectual responsibility" to hold students accountable and to high standards, not because the student body was without merit, but because the teachers and educationalists who created the curriculum and policy were, themselves, people of little useful "talent".[42] Unlike people who could "heal a sick child", "build a bridge", or "write a poem", educationalists were an "abnormal share of mediocre persons" who could only in turn create "a swelling tribe of New Barbarians" in education, "armed with college

[39]"The Gentleman's A," *New York Times*, 19 March 1972.
[40]Hursh, "Assessing No Child left Behind," 497.
[41]Ibid.
[42]William V. Shannon, "The New Barbarians," *New York Times*, 2 July 1972.

degrees and glib phrases but ignorant".[43] We see, again, the emphasis on "talent" as being important in education and teaching, along with the implication that these mediocre educators are perpetuating an un-intellectual academic environment that is cultivating graduates who also have no real talent or valuable contributions to make to society (given the label of barbarians: uncivilised). Mediocrity, then, not only is incompatible in this sense with meritocracy, but also with academic and intellectual environments. Shannon thumbed educators as the cause for the cultivation of mediocrity, but in a letter to the editor addressing this article two weeks later, one citizen, Carl Kern, claimed the fault is not really with teachers, but rather with American society itself:

> The ratio of mediocrity in the population and in education probably hasn't changed in the last thousand years. What has changed is our society's tolerance of it, out of our egalitarian bias. . .. The constitutional principle of equality before the law has been widened and elaborated into the present semiofficial proposition, endlessly promulgated, that everybody is as good as anybody else and therefore deserves all the recognition and reward, indeed all that society has to offer, regardless of ability, behavior or contribution. [44]

Kern's letter amalgamates the concerns and narratives presented in both "Gentleman's A" and "The New Barbarians"; the push for educational equality, initially meant to subvert the privilege and unfair exclusionary practices of the past, has actually caused a major rift amongst proponents of American meritocracy. Equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome is the central tension.[45] Kern cannot accept a system as meritocratic if the "rewards" are equal, as this implies that the "talent" or "ability" input does not matter in the end. Mediocrity in this case, then, becomes aligned with "egalitarian bias", "equality above excellence", and "reward regardless of ability". These talking points would be weaponised against equalisation efforts throughout the decade, starting with the movement to reform school funding between 1971 and 1975.

Fighting for funding: mediocrity and fiscal equalisation in education

During the first half of the 1970s, the fight for equality became a fight for funding, with money allocation serving as the baseline for success in integration and educational equality. This movement began with the "Serrano Case",[46] a decision by the Supreme Court of California which declared that funding schools largely through local property taxes created imbalances between rich and poor communities and violated the constitutional rights of schoolchildren.[47] The decree sent shockwaves across the United States, spurring debate and discussion over the merits and pitfalls of equalising education funds. A comparison made by the NYT between two Southern California communities, Beverley Hills and Baldwin Park, exemplified the existing inequality in school funding: in 1971, Beverly Hills, the home of movie stars and film producers, allocated $1,638 for each of its 5732 pupils, while working-class Baldwin Park could spend only $690 for each

[43]Ibid.
[44]Carl Kern, "Letter to the Editor: Response to 'The New Barbarians'," *New York Times*, 17 July 1972.
[45]This semantic battle also played out in the Dutch context at this time, as found in Hilda T. A. Amsing and Nelleke Bakker, "Comprehensive Education: Lost in the Mi(d)st of a Debate. Dutch Politicians on Equal Opportunity in Secondary Schooling (1965–1979)," *History of Education* 43, no. 5 (2014): 657–75, doi: 10.1080/0046760X.2014.953603.
[46]Officially *John Serrano Jr.*v. *Ivy Baker Priest, as Treasurer of the State of California*.
[47]"Equal Rights to Learn," *New York Times*, 2 September 1971.

of its 12,809 pupils, all while Beverley Hills residents were taxed at nearly half the rate of their lower-income neighbours.[48] Dollar-for-dollar expense comparisons such as this initially made fiscal equalisation a rather popular idea in public discourse across the country, and state governments scrambled to enact school funding reforms ahead of an anticipated federal mandate.[49] In the first NYT report on the Serrano case, "Equal Rights to Learn", the move away from strictly local-tax funding was praised, but the anonymous writer from the NYT warned that moves to close the gap between rich and poor districts should not be done in a way that would level expenditures "down to a lowest common denominator", as this would instead result in the promotion of "educational mediocrity".[50]

The notion of a "lowest common denominator" showcases mediocrity as the depreciation of quality, something that inherently lowers value (in this case, of education). At the same time, it also reflects the stance that egalitarianism erases merit and pulls down those who may have natural advantages, even though wealth and status are by no means "natural". Parents in middle-to-upper-class school districts baulked at the premise that their children might receive less funding from state reforms in order for disadvantaged children to receive more (or at the very least, adequate) funding. Wealthy parents felt that equalising, and thus distributing money from wealthy neighbourhoods to subsidise poorer districts, would only bring harm to wealthy districts. "Closely interpreted, [the decision] would mean the end of our school system", said one parent, Edith Newman: "To destroy the school district, to bring us down to mediocrity serves no purpose".[51] Again, mediocrity represents a lower state, describing something that drags down excellence or merit. Explained by Tyack and Cuban, "in the abstract, people may favor giving all children a fair chance, but at the same time they want their children to succeed in the competition for economic and social advantage".[52] Many dissenters to funding equalisation operationalised the logic that assuring equal funding could only mean that wealthy schools would be pulled down rather than low-income schools raised up to the same level of excellence; thus, the phrase "lowest common denominator" became a popular discursive weapon alongside mediocrity to condemn equalisation efforts as attempts to ruin the quality of American education. This feeling was epitomised in a statement by Superintendent Harold Raynolds Jr of Maine in 1975, who warned that he would need to "start dismantling the schools" if the fiscal equalisation efforts in the state were not reversed: "I can't believe that equal tax rates means only equal mediocrity in the schools", he said, supposedly reflecting the feeling of many educators at the time.[53]

Few educators in rich districts could dispute the egalitarian philosophy behind tax reform, but they found it painful to cope with such reforms during a time of steep inflation and declining enrolments. Crucially, this funding debate also coincided with a major recession in the western world, which likely intensified anxiety over education funding and financial stability and may have contributed in part to their failure. Ultimately, a decision by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1973 rejected the

[48]Robert Reinhold, "John Serrano Jr. et al. and School Tax Equality," *New York Times*, 10 January 1972.
[49]Reinhold, "John Serrano Jr. et al."
[50]Ibid.
[51]"School Quality Believed in Peril," *New York Times*, 1 December 1974.
[52]Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering*, 29.
[53]Robert Reinhold, "States Shift from Property Tax in Bid to Equalize School Funds," *New York Times*, 5 February 1975.

argument that education was a fundamental right under the constitution, which dampened the promise of the movement across the country.[54] Many of the new financial reforms passed by states in the immediate wake of the Serrano case were rolled back within a few years,[55] and equity lawsuits against state funding mechanisms that were filed in the 1970s were still being litigated in dozens of state courts even into the early 2000s.[56] Equalisation in funding would continue to be equated with mediocrity, seen as the lowering of quality in education and the subversion of "natural" advantage of wealthier students.

"If you want a really good education, you have to buy it": the promise of business-minded reform

Privatisation appeared in mediocrity discourse by the middle of the 1970s, thanks largely to middle-to-upper-class parents who were increasingly being given space in newsprint to vent their frustrations with the public schools. One particularly emphatic account from a parent, interviewed outside his upper class home, was featured in a special report on private schooling by the NYT on 18 December 1975:

> 'The public schools are bogged down by mediocrity,' Mr. Anuszkewicz said the other day in his workshop behind his white Victorian home here. 'The public schools say, 'We should have an average world, populated by nice average children, in a nice average country.' While I say why can't we have a superior world, populated by superior children in a superior America. It has come to the point that if you want a really good education, you have to buy it.' [57]

Mediocrity is incompatible with a superior America (particularly on the world stage) and, increasingly, public schools and universities were positioned as encumbered, low-quality, mediocre institutions. Many parents at this time were pulling their children (and, subsequently, funding) out of the public school system, perhaps due to concerns about mediocrity similar to those of Mr Anuszkewicz or because of white flight[58] from integration; regardless of the reasons, the actions of these parents withdrew much needed funding from city budgets at a time when the recession was already putting financial pressure on schools, exacerbating existing problems.

By 1977, the concept of mediocrity began to shift from strictly meritocratic arguments to more business-minded paradigms in the NYT. Ewald B. Nyquist, then vice-president for academic development at Pace University, synthesised the prevalent fears, concerns, and frustrations many Americans were experiencing in a short essay:

> I worry . . . that egalitarianism has gotten so misguided it seems to be an offense for a child to be born with a good mind or some special talent. That petered-out school principals, having risen to their level of incompetence, spread a pall of lowered expectations over an entire

[54]Eric A. Hanushek and Alfred A. Lindseth, *Schoolhouses, Courthouses, and Statehouses: Solving the Funding-Achievement Puzzle in America's Public Schools* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 89–90.
[55]Reinhold, "States Shift from Property Tax in Bid to Equalize School Funds."
[56]Hanushek and Lindseth, *Schoolhouses, Courthouses, and Statehouses*, 89–90.
[57]Ronald Sullivan, "More New Jersey Parents are Sending Children to Private Schools in the City," *New York Times*, 18 December 1975.
[58]White flight refers to the mass exodus of (mostly white) middle-to-upper class families from the inner cities to the suburbs and private schools, largely to evade school integration.

> school, especially among minority groups. . .. That a new principle is in the making . . . and gaining acceptance – namely, that mediocrity has a right to be represented at Olympian heights of educational governance.[59]

Mediocrity in this context is far from a neutral charge: Nyquist implies an almost malicious incompetence of mediocre educators and educational leadership who are supposedly lowering the quality of education in the United States. More so, we see repeated the assertion that egalitarianism stands in opposition to merit and performance, and is thus still aligned with mediocrity in public discourse. That same year, another impassioned author, Frank E. Armbruster, published his take on the present state of American education, forebodingly titled: *Our Children's Crippled Future: How American Education Has Failed*. Similar to Nyquist, Armbruster attacked the new educational norms and expressed sentimental nostalgia for the school systems of America's past. The NYT overall expressed criticism and disagreement with Armbruster's disparaging statements on education, but they framed his main argument as a conflict between excellence and mediocrity: "Instead of producing academic excellence, the vast infusion of resources into education that has occurred in recent years has purchased 'expensive but unproductive gimmickry' in the form of open classrooms, modular scheduling, and other 'reforms' that simply contribute to mediocrity."[60] Armbruster placed fault squarely with teachers who united with students in a common desire to seek the easy way out, "seemingly in a giant conspiracy to undermine educational standards".[61]

The idea that education should be judged largely in the context of taxpayer input and measured value output had been slowly developing as a narrative for a few years by the time his book was published. Hints of this idea could be seen in the previous exploration of the school funding debate, as the underlying implication of both pro- and anti-equalisation advocates was essentially that educational success correlated with dollar amounts. The discourse concerning the funding of education began to shift, from how money should be allocated to which academic programmes or faculty members could be eliminated. Some viewed these cuts as an opportunity to cut "wasteful spending" and "unnecessary expenses" in education, as did NYT education editor Fred M. Hechinger, who argued on 31 January 1979 that school systems, like police and fire departments, could save money by cutting budgets to eliminate waste, inefficiency, and featherbedding of mediocre teachers.[62] Hechinger's assessment reinforced the idea that educators should adapt to a more business-like model of schooling, to improve educational quality. Budget cuts in this situation are framed as a means of achieving efficiency in education, of improving performance of students and teachers by making schools less comfortable and forcing reliance on individual talent and effort to succeed. Mediocrity can be reduced, so the argument goes, if educators figure out

[59]Ewald B. Nyquist, " . . . On Education," *New York Times*, 3 December 1977.
[60]Edward B. Fiske, "Our Children's Crippled Future: How American Education Has Failed by Frank E. Armbruster," *New York Times*, 12 November 1977.
[61]Ibid.
[62]Fred M. Hechinger, "About Education: 'Frills' in School are Often Basic," *New York Times*, 23 January 1979.

how to achieve the same (or better) results with fewer resources, relying on excellent individual traits such as hard work and ingenuity, which come at "no additional cost".[63]

At least one reader, however, was highly critical of Hechinger's comments, casting doubt on the supposed promises of business-minded reforms to education. "Fred Hechinger is grossly unfair to those of us who stumble along in our mediocrity . . ."[64] proclaimed Brooklyn resident William Hunter:

> If mediocrity is good enough for automobile manufacturers who can't create a car that isn't called back and who are still considered the backbone of our nation; if mediocrity is good enough for the steel industry which can't compete against imports; if mediocrity is good enough for Big Business which wants to be subsidized and tariff-protected and receive a tax deduction for a three-martini lunch; mediocrity is good enough for most of our hospitals and most of our politicians and most of New York's sports teams — why, by golly, being average, being ordinary, being plain downhome mediocre should be good enough for teachers and administrators.[65]

Hunter's argument highlights an interesting contradiction in the discourse of the time: that the market approach to education was seen as the most promising way to save and improve America's schools, even though the actual model businesses, themselves, were largely failing or struggling to compete internationally. Hunter notably mixes different conceptualisations of mediocrity in his short letter, so that the term means not only "average" or "ordinary", but also "failure" and "uncompetitive", demonstrating how the concept could have multiple layers of meaning and subtle differences, even when used by the same speaker. Hunter's defence was impassioned, but it seemed also an anomaly; all other articles and letters analysed took a far more critical stance against mediocrity in education.

Less than a year later, Hugh B. Price, a member of the editorial board for the NYT, demonstrated the further prevalence of business language in public discourse with his article "Making and Breaking Public Schools: Educators are Quick to Protect but Slow to Produce". Price argued that public schools were being "outcompeted" by private schools, which, contrary to public schools, had actually seen an increase in enrolments since 1975.[66] Despite the large drop in population of students, Price believed the problem was that public schools had failed to "improve their product", because they chose to protect ineffective or unproductive "managers" and refused to innovate.[67] He particularly blamed teachers and claimed the lack of meritocratic pay schemes contributed to mediocrity:

> Few enterprises function well without sanctions against those who fail to perform . . . yet public schools are notoriously bad at holding administrators and teachers accountable. Salary systems that reward mediocrity need to be replaced by systems in which cash bonuses, for instance, reward excellence.[68]

[63]Ibid.
[64]William J. Hunter, "Letter to the Editor: If Mediocrity is Good Enough for . . ., " *New York Times*, 3 February 1979.
[65]Hunter, "Letter to the Editor: If Mediocrity is Good Enough for . . . ."
[66]Hugh B. Price, "Making and Breaking Public Schools: Professional Educators are Quick to Protect but Slow to Produce," *New York Times*, 26 May 1980.
[67]Ibid.
[68]Ibid.

Through Price's article, we see the anti-egalitarian arguments of the early 1970s mixed with business-minded promises for improved schooling. The change in vocabulary is notable, with terms such as "enterprise", "evaluation", "accountability", and "performance incentives" signalling a more neoliberal direction in public discourse on education. According to Price, mediocre schools that have no consequences for those who fail to perform, are inefficient and costly, and do not reward success and excellence, can only improve if they cut burdensome and expensive bureaucratic policies and enact meritocratic pay systems. The concept of mediocrity has now become intertwined with business language and practices, but it signifies an evolution rather than a complete change in meaning. The previous meritocratic, individual-focused connotations combine with business language to set the stage for mediocrity to moderate the next great debate in public education: merit pay for teachers.

Performance pay: teachers' salaries, merit, and rewarding excellence

A major focus of mediocrity discourse in the early 1980s centred on teacher pay, particularly on restructuring salary systems to reward excellence and subvert mediocrity in the teaching profession. The prevailing argument was that meritocratic policies in education, based on market approaches, could reward skills, high achievement, and results, unlike the egalitarian system of educational equality, which many believed punished success. With the election of President Ronald Reagan, the conversations around education would steer steadfastly towards neoliberal talking points, particularly in terms of shrinking government involvement, individual responsibility, and performance pay. When President Reagan was elected in 1980, one of his campaign promises was to eliminate the Department of Education, arguing that "welfare and education are matters that should be left exclusively at the state and local levels".[69] After a decade of legislative interventions, the federal government now sought to absolve itself of responsibility for educational affairs, instead deferring to private industries and the market to handle issues in education. A representative of Reagan's policy development team reinforced this new focus: "We disagree with those who say that the Federal Government should be ultimately responsible for this problem [with school funding and academic performance] ... private industry should do more to help local schools on which they depend for future talent".[70] Amid poor performance in maths and science assessments across the country, Secretary of Education Terrance Bell further outlined the government's new educational philosophy, arguing that schools were failing due "to the concern for educational equality in recent years", which "led to a sacrifice of quality and excellence".[71] Bell's suggestion that quality cannot exist with educational equality is familiar, but to see such a conceptualisation expressed at the highest level of educational governance is still quite notable, particularly as the Federal Government had spent the previous decade pushing for the very equality reforms they were now condemning.

[69]Dan Bauman and Brock Read, "A Brief History of GOP Attempts to Kill the Education Department," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 June 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Brief-History-of-GOP/243739 (accessed 1 May 2020).
[70]Robert Reinhold, "Reagan Warns Schools are Failing to Meet Science and Math Needs," *New York Times*, 13 May 1982.
[71]Ibid.

The ideological challenger to Reagan's approach to schooling at this time was the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), led by Albert Shanker. The AFT was staunchly opposed to meritocratic pay schemes, and fiercely advocated for the continuation of structured, reliable salary schedules, arguing that "rewarding the few" would lead to the "demoralization of the rest". In a series of advertisements in the NYT in early 1983, Shanker addressed the merit pay issue. While he acknowledged that it is hard to argue against the idea of excellent teachers earning greater rewards than mediocre ones, he explained that this popular view was ultimately out of touch with the reality within schools, stating:

> Merit pay has been tried in many districts over the last 80 years and has been abandoned everywhere. Why? For the most part, 'master teachers' are selected by the principal or school superintendent. Most teachers . . . view the selection process as one which was designed to further the political aims of the school administration rather than the educational aims of the school.

The following week, Shanker published another advertisement building upon his argument that politics subvert merit pay, stating:

> The irony is that in many of our schools the outstanding teacher who refuses to do ritualistic paperwork is rated unsatisfactory, while the marginal teacher . . . who submits to all the rituals is given high marks . . . even after we have solved the problem of providing adequate financial rewards, we are not going to get good teachers to keep them so long as school management rewards blind obedience to authority above creativity and excellence.[72]

These advertisements by Shanker garnered responses from citizens on both sides of the issue, allowing the debate on teacher pay to be publicly contested across the pages of the NYT. On 6 February 1983, a letter responding to Shanker's advertisement was published, submitted by a concerned citizen Joseph Della Badia:

> The negativism Albert Shanker directs toward the concept of paying teachers on the basis of performance . . . serves only to facilitate the erosion of confidence in public education. His remarks clearly support the view that the teaching profession encourages mediocrity: one need only get older to receive next year's going rate. The message is outrageous and insulting to the very people Mr. Shanker represents and does much to preserve what he and his union are committed to changing: subsistence-level salaries. As long as the price of rewarding outstanding teachers is held to be "the hostility and demoralization of all the rest," our schools will be in the grip of 'all the rest,' and communities will continue to set salaries on the basis of the lowest common denominator. Teachers will receive salaries on a level similar to that of other professionals when they agree to be measured by performance. Only then will we be able to attract, on a competitive basis, top-flight professionals and retain them.[73]

Mediocrity in Badia's understanding denotes a type of laziness, an unwillingness of teachers to adapt or work hard for more pay. The lowest common denominator argument comes back into play, as well, as a means of arguing that the current system based on experience subverts the influence of merit and natural talent in the teaching profession. It is clear that Badia supports meritocratic pay structures, criticising the old structures as encouraging mediocrity, complacency, and ineffectiveness in teachers.

[72] Albert Shanker, "Where We Stand: Does Pavarotti Have to File an Aria Plan? Supervisors' Rigidity Angers Teachers," *New York Times*, 6 February 1983 (*TimesMachine*, Week in Review, page 129, E7), https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1983/02/06/issue.html (accessed 13 October 2020).

[73] Joseph Della Badia, "Letter to the Editor: Shankers Blow for Teacher Mediocrity," *New York Times*, 6 February 1983.

The idea that experience-based salary systems encourage greediness and laziness positions teachers as uncaring employees who refuse to be held accountable for their actions, rather than public servants with the best interests of society at heart. Badia even portrays performance pay as an avenue for teachers to escape the "subsistence-level" salaries created by budget cuts and the devaluing of the profession over the previous decade. Questions remained, however, as to how teacher performance could be reliably measured. One teacher, Myron Feinstein, brought these concerns to the NYT with his letter to the editor a week later:

> It is ironic that on the day that Albert Shanker writes perhaps his most incisive column ever, a letter from the school superintendent of New Jersey's Chatham Township calls once again for that educational outrage, the merit system: that teachers be paid not on years of service or talent but on 'performance'. Do we have to guess who is going to be the judge of that performance? I am in my 30th year of teaching, and I wish to state categorically that a merit system would presage educational disaster. The beauty of teaching is imagination, creativity and the willingness to chance something to see whether or not it will work. Institute a merit system, and you institute educational fascism: a lock-step mentality in which only the supervisor determines the acceptable. This is what leads to mediocrity: rigid controls, rigid formulas, rigid lesson plans –and rigor mortis in the classroom. I won't even broach the obvious other question: How are we to judge the competence of supervisors?[74]

A veteran of the classroom, Feinstein called the "performance" measure into serious question, clarifying that performance does not necessarily mean "talent" and echoing Shanker's sentiments that the power and politics behind merit pay would lead only to disaster in America's schools. Where Badia speaks ill of the pay system that rewards teachers for the number of years they have taught, rather than the quality of their performance, Feinstein frames teachers as public servants who invest their time and efforts into the betterment of society rather than individual rewards. Mediocrity here is rigidity, uncreative, and the negative end of an ambiguous synchronous concept of "performance". The fine but important distinction between individualistic teachers and public servants demonstrates how the neoliberal business perspective had permeated the public sphere of educational discourse by 1983. The release of *A Nation at Risk* just two months later would solidify the neoliberal path forward, but, from analysing these public debates on education, it is evident that the ideas espoused in the national report were not new, but rather picked up on questions and issues fiercely debated among the general public and in educational milieux in the decades prior to its publication.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to construct a conceptual history of mediocrity in American education through the analysis of newspaper articles, to determine how the concept developed in public discourse on education leading up to the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. A conceptual history approach allowed us to explore the multiplicity of meanings within the concept of mediocrity, as well as the concept's relationship to other prominent concepts, themes, and debates in American educational history. In this paper, we have argued that the concept of mediocrity played a facilitating role in developing narratives on meritocratic and

[74]Myron Feinstein, "Letter to the Editor: How to get 'Lock Step' into America's Schools," *New York Times*, 13 February 1983.

neoliberal education policies during the 1970s and early 1980s; this was quite evident, for example, in debates over school funding, where mediocrity and the notion of the "lowest common denominator" contributed to the diminishing popularity of fiscal equalisation measures in public schooling. We also have argued that the concept embodied a range of nuanced meanings, which exemplified its capacity to represent a distinct position in educational debates, as well as generate experience and set expectations as a concept with a life of its own. Mediocrity, as the multiplicity of its meanings suggest, served as a container concept that was used by various actors, often to argue for very different things. This observation particularly applied in debates over educational equality and school funding, business approaches to education, and performance pay for teachers.

The concept itself was positioned early in the 1970s as the opposite of merit, or the absence of "natural" talent or ability, a conceptualisation that persisted over the decade to continually deride egalitarian educational policies and funding principles. This framing occurred in spite of the original motives of egalitarian measures to actually subvert unmeritocratic discrimination in education based on privilege and race rather than talent. Mediocrity in this sense embodied notions of ignorance, un-intellectualism, low value, or a lack of talent and excellence. Frequently, the phrase "lowest common denominator" appeared in conjunction with mediocrity in fiscal equalisation debates, clearly demonstrating mediocrity as something "lower", be it in quality, performance, skill, or class; the implication was that mediocre schools or persons could only drag excellence down, that rising to excellence was not within their ability, and that allocating more money could not remedy the poor inherent traits and social standing of the mediocre. Besides targeting egalitarianism and equality initiatives in general, the concept was consistently lobbied at educators and those in educational leadership who were framed as the cause of mediocrity in schools, or mediocre themselves.

As market approaches to education and more neoliberal narratives began to permeate public educational discourse, mediocrity as a concept began to take on a more business-like tone. While its broader conceptualisation was still largely framed as not excellent or low quality, mediocrity with schools and educators also began to align with undesirable traits in business practices, such as inefficiency, wastefulness, underperformance, a lack of work ethic, a lack of creativity, or being uncompetitive. The dichotomy of success and failure became more entrenched in the concept as education began to be marketised; as time went on, "average" seemed gradually to fade from the conceptualisation, as excellence and success necessitated failure for their own realisation; anything in between detracted from the us-versus-them, zero-sum narrative, which is more reminiscent of neoliberal approaches to education. Mediocrity meant failure, wasteful, free-loading, undermining … all traits that would hinder not just individual success, but also national success. Competition in education, domestically and internationally, gradually became a central focus in public discourse on education, and mediocrity was adapted to further narratives of a failing school system and the need for market reforms to overcome these perceived failures.

Anti-egalitarian notions and marketised conceptualisations of mediocrity converged in the debates over performance pay for teachers as the 1970s came to a close. The administration of President Reagan pushed performance pay as a means of incentivising performance and effort from educators, who were still largely portrayed as the source, and embodiment, of mediocrity in America's schools. While their more neoliberal stance saw performance pay as a means of rewarding meritocratic principles of talent and ability, the

other side of the debate led by the American Federation of Teachers saw performance pay policies as subverting meritocracy, due to the reality that schools are political systems where playing by bureaucratic rules often overrides performance. Mediocrity appeared on both sides of the dispute as a seemingly accepted truth in American education: mediocrity was real, but what actually constituted mediocrity was now up for debate. In pro-performance pay arguments, mediocrity persisted as a concept meaning low quality, poor performance, non-competitiveness, and low work ethic in teachers, while performance pay detractors saw mediocrity as a lack of creativity and an unwillingness to change or adapt. The issue of performance pay, and the centrality of teachers in educational quality debates, persists even today; however, by investigating these debates through the lens of mediocrity, underlying narratives, motives, and beliefs that undergird these public discourses on American education become more visible.

Awareness of the historicity of mediocrity, and the layers of meanings that accompany it, has the potential to benefit a range of current research domains in education. Naturally, this study allows educational researchers to reflect meaningfully on the ways in which language shapes, and is shaped by, historical developments in education. It presents a new perspective through which issues of educational equality, marketisation of education, meritocratic educational policies, and neoliberal education can be understood, and allows the historicization of a concept that has largely been used ahistorically in contemporary discourse to critique and deride education systems. It is essential that common concepts, such as excellence and mediocrity, are understood as historical productions with a variety of implications, in order to depart from patterns of generalisation, self-referential meaning, and over-simplification, which often occur in public debates. Similar to the idea of "crisis" in education, the concept of mediocrity is a social construct, and the role of American society in its conceptualisation gives the concept particularities that may not be applicable or transferable to social situations in other nations. Reminiscent of previous research, the air of crisis surrounding mediocrity's use is a crisis of meaning,[75] a semantic battle that continues to shape our educational realities, and that necessitates further exploration and construction.

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[75]Steeves et al., "Transforming American Educational Identity after Sputnik," 85.

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