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Representing teachers as criminals in the news: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of the Atlanta schools' "Cheating Scandal"

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Abstract

On April 1, 2015, 11 Atlanta teachers accused of changing answers on their students' standardized tests were convicted of racketeering and sentenced to 5–20 years in prison. Despite ample news coverage, few sources investigated teachers' motivations for altering students' responses or explored what the consequences would have been if student scores had not been changed to passing. Moreover, the fact that the teachers' actions resulted from systemic problems associated with working within a high-stakes testing environment is glossed over and all but lost in the reporting of the "Cheating Scandal" events. The authors conduct a critical multimodal analysis of how semiotic resources were used to represent teachers in the Atlanta "Cheating Scandal" and show how the media's framing of teachers both reflects and conceals specific interests of the powerful educational reform movement and the corporations that benefit from it, such as Pearson, Inc. Data sources included four online news sources from April 2015 that covered the teachers' sentencing, and the authors analyzed the visual and verbal transformations that occurred during the process of recontextualization. Analysis revealed the construction of a moral narrative that depicted the teachers as selfish and incompetent, reinforcing the dominant paradigm driving school reform in the USA. The authors conclude by calling for more counter-narratives that expose how dominant representations reify negative public perceptions of teachers.

Keywords: Teachers, media; crime, Atlanta Cheating Scandal, social semiotics

"When a teacher is enrolled in a corrupt system, where fulfillment of her legal and organizational responsibilities require her to harm her students, when does she owe it to herself and to her students to refuse?" (Rothstein 2015)

"All I want from any of these people is just to take some responsibility, but they refuse, they refuse." (Judge Jerry Baxter)

1. Introduction

On 1 April 2015, 11 (of 12) Atlanta, Georgia, teachers accused of changing answers on their students' standardized tests were convicted of racketeering and sentenced to 5–20 years in

prison.^{1,2} Their trial was highly publicized across the USA locally and nationally on all media outlets, and viewers were able to track the “Cheating Scandal” events easily on social media and TV under headlines such as “Latest Cheating Scandal Headlines”, “The Who’s Who of the APS Trial”, and “Judgment Day”. Despite ample coverage, little was made publicly known about why the teachers changed students’ scores or what the potential effects of *not* changing their scores might have been. Not only did the criminal aspect of the teachers’ actions go largely undisputed, but the unusually harsh nature of their convictions – convictions that were more extreme than many convicted of violent crimes, including rape – was also never questioned. Moreover, in media coverage about events leading to their conviction, as well as those that followed, there was little chance for the teachers’ voices and perspectives to be heard. Therefore, this paper not only seeks to denaturalize the discourse related to the Atlanta teachers’ actions and convictions, but also seeks to raise awareness about how teachers are represented both verbally and visually in the data. In this way, we aim to refocus attention on the important history and context that was absent from most of the news coverage, specifically the ways in which teachers experience the crushing pressures of accountability which stem largely from an unquestioned valorization of the educational reform movement. Therefore, we ask: What kinds of semiotic resources were used to represent the Atlanta teachers and how do these reflect and conceal specific interests and power relations?

2. Crime, media, and teachers

This section provides a brief overview of scholarly work that examines media discourse and crime, and media coverage of teachers. Historically, the fields of media studies, criminology, psychology, and sociology have shed light on how media may distort crime and on the way that some events are defined as crime and others that appear to have equal gravity are not (Mayr and Machin 2012). Although “crime narratives have always been a prominent part of the content of all mass media” (Greer 2003, 44), there has been little study of the language of crime discourse (but see Machin and Mayr 2012; Mayr and Machin 2012). Research examining the role of language in crime discourse illustrates how media portrayals of crime can be used by the powerful to distract from their own responsibilities to society (Mayr and Machin 2012). Furthermore, there is a “symbiotic relationship between mass media and politicians which is illustrated by the support given to matters of law and order” (Jewkes 2004, 59) and it is in the interests of the wealthy and powerful to conceal this relationship. In fact, critical analyses of crime and the media have also found that the media often neglects crimes of the privileged and instead reifies dominant perceptions that young, working-class, unemployed, and ethnic minorities are more likely to commit crimes (Mayr and Machin 2012). “Frequently, then, the truly powerless, rather than the truly evil, are demonized and stigmatized in the popular media” (Greer and Jewkes 2005, 29). A good example of research that examines how the wealthy and powerful are represented positively while minority groups and those without power are represented negatively in discourse about crime can be seen in Catalano and Waugh (2013). In this study, the authors found that Latino migrants were represented negatively in media discourse while CEOs convicted of heinous crimes were represented positively and in non-crime frames.

When studying the representations of crime, we must attend to both context and framing. Iyengar's (1991) research on the framing of political issues on television news' programs is particularly helpful for the purposes of our analysis. Iyengar posits that political issues in media discourse usually take either an episodic or thematic frame. Episodic frames focus on "specific events or particular cases" whereas thematic frames "place political issues and events in some general context" (1991, 2). In his research on the framing of television news reports of issues such as crime, poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality, he found that news reports were dominated by episodic framing. He also found that issues that cannot be reduced to specific events or occurrences (e.g. global warming) are seldom covered; consequently, the public is unable to develop critical perspectives and the issues (e.g. racial inequality) are rendered invisible (Iyengar 1991). In Cottle's (2009) work on the representation of new wars, major disasters, and climate change in the media, he refers to framing as "news staging". According to Cottle, in the case of global crises, news media not only communicate the crises but help constitute them, and in doing so, "powerfully shape their course and conduct" (2009, 508). Drawing on the work of numerous scholars in the field, Cottle demonstrates the enhanced importance of news media in managing public perceptions (Shaw 2005), how elites capitalize on the shock of the events to galvanize forces for change (Klein 2007), and how crises that are shaped by news media eventually become staged as global spectacles by actively dramatizing and enacting certain issues as crises (Cottle 2009, 507). While this paper does not deal with a global crisis, Cottle's work is highly relevant because it shows the importance of news media in shaping public perceptions.

Returning to Iyengar's work, in his (1991) study on the framing of poverty, he found that news reports using episodic framing of poverty featuring Black, adult single mothers strongly correlated to viewers deeming those subjects as responsible for their poverty, thus shifting responsibility from society to the poor. Besides Iyengar's (1991) work that demonstrates the bias against Black women on television, a large body of research has determined a general bias against the representation of African-Americans and women in crime (Dixon and Maddox 2005; Gilliam et al. 1996; Jewkes 2004; Oliver 2003; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer 1998). Episodic framing not only shapes how the public views (and judges) women and racialized minorities, but also shapes how the public perceives teachers, education policy, and schools. Gabriel and Lester (2013) found striking similarities between the way that the *L.A. Times* presented the debate on value-added measurement (which seeks to connect student test scores to teacher evaluations) and a quest romance or wish-fulfillment narrative which gave their version of events familiarity, veracity, and power over the public imagination reaffirming "the values of the national culture" (Santa Ana 2016, 15). Goldstein's (2011) study on media framing of the No Child Left Behind (hereafter NCLB) education policy revealed an overwhelmingly negative representation of teachers and teacher's unions which affected public perceptions of education in a negative manner.

There were a few articles found that examine the representation of teachers in media discourse (e.g. Cohen 2010; Dalton and Linder 2008), but no articles examined how teachers are represented in crime discourse despite the fact that there is no shortage of teachers in the media in relation to crime (e.g. teachers and/or coaches sleeping with students). However, research has found that when women are shown as failing to conform to cultural stereotypes of the maternal and caring female, they often face "vitriolic treatment by the

media" (Mayr and Machin 2012, 115). This work is particularly relevant to this study as teachers are seen as being engaged in a caring profession and therefore it is not surprising that the violation (or perceived violation) of this norm would be treated harshly in the media.

3. High-stakes testing and the Atlanta Public Schools

Although competitive testing has been a fixture in the American school system since the mid-to-late nineteenth century (Reese 2013), the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2002 (called NCLB) intensified the role of federal authority in schools and made high-stakes, standardized testing the evaluative centerpiece in US schools. The policy, which was passed with widespread, bipartisan support in Congress, reflected the belief that more testing in schools translates to higher standards and equalizes academic achievement for all students (Reese 2013). As the title of the policy suggests, NCLB acknowledged that the education of particular groups of students, especially racialized minorities and children living in poverty, had been sub-par; a wide-scale, transparent, and publicly tracked system of student and school performance (enacted through compulsory, high-stakes testing), then, be the way to remedy these inequalities in part by "hold[ing] teachers accountable for educational shortcomings" (Hursh 2005, 607). Every student in a school is identified by race, gender, and ethnic group, and disability status; test scores are then disaggregated along these lines and if any one group does not make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP), the entire school is designated as failing (Hursh 2005). If a school does not make AYP for five consecutive years, it is shut down, restaffed, and reopened under new leadership. According to NCLB's logic of accountability, instantiated in AYP tracking, all students would be "proficient" by the year 2014.

There is no shortage of scholarship critiquing the consequences of high-stakes testing in the USA (e.g. Au 2011; Crocco and Costigan 2006; Hursh 2005, 2013; Saltman 2014; Slater 2015). Not only do high-stakes tests constrict teaching and curriculum, but they do so almost exclusively in schools that serve low-income, racialized minority, and/or linguistically diverse students. This narrowing of curriculum de-skills and de-professionalizes the teachers working in these schools. As Au (2011) explains, "US teachers are compelled to rely less upon their own knowledge and expertise in the educative process and instead are required to take direction from outside educational 'experts' who develop the standardized tests and/or pre-packaged curriculum" (34).

NCLB and the testing regime have resulted in fewer learning opportunities for students, less teacher autonomy and professional/curricular decision-making, and more narratives of failure as schools fail to meet AYP. In turn, the high-stakes testing regime operationalized by the NCLB policy has expanded corporate interest in schools and created a marketplace of and for schools where select people profit (e.g. Ball 2012; Ravitch 2014; Saltman 2014). Slater (2015) aptly describes this dynamic of failure and rescue that NCLB creates: "In a fit of almost pathological deceit, neoliberals regularly position public education as both a *source* of crisis and a *site* of reform" (8).

Because there is so much at stake for schools who risk not meeting AYP goals, "creative bookkeeping" practices (Hursh 2005) abound as schools manage the increasingly precarious demands of trying to educate (rather than school) their students at the same time they

adhere to the strict (and public) policy mandates of test-based accountability. Schools' creative interpretation of data has been made more likely since the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) policy that requires states who win RTTT grants to tether teacher evaluations to their students' standardized test scores. In New York state, for example, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo pushed a measure through the Board of Regents that would make state tests count for up to 40% of teachers' evaluations (Hursh 2013).

In the case of Atlanta, the policy mandates of NCLB contributed to the state's decision to link grade promotion to tests. This meant that instead of teacher-based retention where the teacher would decide (based on the student's performance throughout the year and on many assessments) whether or not they were ready for the following grade, the student's standardized test scores would be the sole determinant for promotion (Huddleston 2014). Notably, and in keeping with the magical thinking from which these policies decisions seem to stem, this decision to enact test-based retention in Atlanta Public Schools did not take into account the devastating effects of this very same policy in Chicago and Philadelphia (e.g. Roderick and Nagaoka 2005). If scores were not changed to passing, students would be retained in their grade. This might explain why 44 out of 56 schools were charged with altering test scores according to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (Flock 2011). Importantly, as many scholars and researchers have noted, the correlation between a student being retained in their grade and dropping out of school is very high (i.e. Roderick and Nagaoka 2005). More than this, and more immediately, if students' scores were not passing, the school would be closed, students scattered, teachers fired, and corporate/private consultants would have license to enter the scene in order to "recover" it from crisis (Slater 2015). Because the specter of school failure looms most ominously over schools that serve communities where students come from disinvested neighborhoods, are ethnic or racialized minorities, are working poor, and/or have a first language other than English, the teachers who work in these schools are most likely to experience pressure to teach to the test (e.g., Au 2011; Croft, Roberts, and Stenhouse 2016; Hursh 2013, 2015) and to use curriculum packages from mega-corporations like Pearson, Inc.

The role of Pearson, Inc., is particularly important to address when thinking about the larger implications of high-stakes testing and the ways in which the testing regime shapes schooling and teaching in the USA, in large part because Pearson is so deeply entrenched in the testing mechanisms that determine failure of schools, teachers, and teacher preparation programs. In fact, Pearson commands up to 60% of the market on testing and certified curriculum materials to be used in preparation for their tests (Strauss 2015). Croft, Roberts, and Stenhouse (2016) refer to the role of corporations like Pearsons as the "Testing Industrial Complex" (p. 72). They explain:

The testing industrial complex [TIC] directly relates to (and emulates) foundational elements of the prison industrial complex, such as: (a) the use of surveillance and unwarranted policing to feed punitive reform measures used to solve what are in reality economic, social, and political problems; (b) a confluence of bureaucratic, political, economic, and racialized interests with the underlying purpose of diverting profit from public entities to private corporations; (c) increases in high-stakes outcomes and curricular coopting, even though neither has shown to improve outcomes; and (d) a perception that the complex is practically impossible to dismantle. (see Roberts in press). (72–73)

This TIC, of which Pearson is a part, has profound consequences for both teachers and students. As we will show, the Atlanta Cheating Scandal exemplifies how the media's gaze fixates on the teachers' actions rather than exploring the damaging and notable effects of the TIC.

4. Method

4.1. Data selection

This qualitative study illustrating how teachers are represented visually and verbally in media discourse regarding the Atlanta Public Schools' "Cheating Scandal" focuses on four online news reports from different news sources (*NBC news*, *CNN*, *USA Today wsbtv.com*) that include multimodal data (see Appendix 2). Articles were selected based on the following criteria:

- (1) Articles must be multimodal in nature (e.g. video and/or photographs) along with text.
- (2) Articles must be between 200 and 2000 words in length.
- (3) Articles must have been published between April 1 and 15 2015.
- (4) Articles must have a main topic of the conviction and sentencing of Atlanta teachers for cheating.
- (5) Articles must be from US local and/or national news sources.

Because our data sample is not representative of the entire body of media discourse on this issue, we concentrate on demonstrating how the teachers were framed in regard to the events as opposed to providing quantitative information relating to media reports of how teachers are framed.

4.2. Data analysis

To analyze our data, we employed critical multimodal discourse analysis in order to identify and reveal how visual and verbal semiotic choices communicate power relations. Critical multimodal discourse analysis combines multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) with the purpose of exposing "how the use and abuse of social power is produced, reproduced and maintained in communication" (Mayr and Machin 2012, 8). The incorporation of a social semiotic lens to the critical analysis of multimodal data "helps us to not take representations for granted as reflections of reality..." (Chandler 2007, 82). In addition, we view the visual and verbal choices made in the data in light of the "context of the observed available resources" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 19) looking at the events in light of the political/social context of educational reform in the USA. We agree with van Leeuwen that all texts should be interpreted as representations of social practices, and that texts not only represent what is going on, "they evaluate it, ascribe purposes for it, justify it, and so on"; thus, in many texts (such as ours), "these aspects of representation become far more important than the representation of the social practice itself" (van Leeuwen 2008, 6). This difference between social practices and representations of them seems obvious, but it is often ignored. Hence, the present paper aims to focus on the recontextualization that occurs when "Cheating Scandal" events are transformed into a representation of the events in online news media sources.

First, we examined the verbal elements (from the verbal texts as well as videos accompanying the written texts) that were transformed in the recontextualization process. We uploaded all the texts as one file into the Maxqda qualitative software analysis program and then we coded for types of transformations (cf. van Leeuwen 2008). We then focused on salient transformations that emerged from the data such as legitimization (including authorization, moral evaluation, and repetition) and substitution. For the iconographical analysis, we coded images/video manually for types of transformation focusing on legitimization (including authorization and moral evaluation) and repetition. In doing so, we looked at how individual elements in the videos – such as objects, settings, typeface, color, layout, camera angle, graphics, and visual metonymy – signified discourses in ways not obvious to the average reader.

5. Findings

5.1. Verbal representation of Atlanta teachers

In order to analyze the recontextualization that occurs when a journalist transforms the “Cheating Scandal” events into a *story* about the events, we must also consider the complexity of the analysis itself: not only are the journalists representing the events in the story, but the people with whom the journalist talks are *also* representing their version of the events. For example, in the videos, newscasters refer to other journalists to report on the events, but then they also editorialize these events as they discuss them. As van Leeuwen notes, “Recontextualization is also recursive – it can happen over and over again, removing us further and further from the starting point of the chain of recontextualizations” (2008, 13). It is through this lens that we will analyze not only how the people quoted in the articles re-construct the sentencing events, but how the journalists re-construct the quotations and comments made by particular actors in the story.

In the first phase of our analysis, we examine how the “Cheating Scandal” events are justified and evaluated by participants, and then by the journalists. Referred to as *legitimizations* by van Leeuwen (2008), they serve to provide reasons for why social practices occur. In the case of the sentencing of the teachers, Judge Jerry Baxter is the expert authority whose legitimacy is provided by his expertise and status as judge. In his statements justifying his harsh sentences for the teachers, he combines the use of moral evaluation and authority legitimization to position the teachers as evil wrongdoers who “refuse” to take responsibility for their actions. The below comments demonstrate how he accomplishes this:

Text 2: “I think there were **hundreds, thousands of children who were harmed**,” the judge said. “That’s what gets lost in all of this.”

Text 2: “**They should have rose up** [sic] **and said no**,” the judge said of pressure to alter standardized test scores. “**They didn’t, and here we are**.”

Text 3: “Everybody starts crying about these educators. This was not a victimless crime that occurred in this city!” Baxter said.

Text 3: “These stories are incredible. These kids can’t read,” he said.

Text 4: “It’s not one of the things I get a kick out of, but they have made their bed and they’re going to have to lie in it,” Baxter said.

In the first example, which was featured twice in the article (once in larger typeface), the judge uses aggregation (e.g. *hundreds, thousands*) to construct the children as one unanimous group and highlight the sheer size of who was *harmed*. Furthermore, he frames the teachers as criminals and students as victims, adding *that's what gets lost in all this* as a presupposition that this was a fact that was hidden, when it is not a fact at all. This is important because the notion that the teachers are perpetrators and students are helpless victims is a result of the communicative choices made by the journalist to include, repeat, and enlarge this expression.

In the second example, the judge justifies the sentencing in a different way, by claiming that the teachers had the power to stand up against those who pressured them. Using deontic modality (Machin and Mayr 2012) to persuade listeners (e.g. *should have rose [sic] up*), he highlights teacher agency, and yet no details are given about the pressure teachers faced or the negative consequences that would occur for children if they did not pass the tests. Moreover, the phrasing *should have rose [sic] up* grammatically implies that the "Cheating Scandal" events were singular in nature and that teachers would have had a simple choice in this one moment to rise up against cheating. This is an example of Iyengar's (1991) concept of episodic framing as opposed to thematic framing: the former decontextualizes events while the latter framing would have placed the teachers' actions in context, thereby complicating the narrative of responsibility by showing that there were many other forces at work.

In the third quote, the judge legitimizes the sentencing once again, pointing to the (disputed) fact that the children cannot read as a consequence of the teachers' cheating, even though there is no connection between changing a student's test scores and a child's ability to read. The next example adds to this narrative, comparing opponents of the harsh sentencing to babies (e.g. *crying*) and using the language of crime (e.g. *victimless, crime*) to frame the teachers as deviants. In the final example, the judge is positioned as the moral authority, dressing up "traditional morality tales that justify a political order" (Santa Ana 2016, 15) by pointing out how the teachers should have taken responsibility – a presupposition that they are guilty. The telling of this cautionary tale (e.g. *you made your bed, now lie in it*) serves to point out to readers what happens when you "do not conform to the norms of social practices" (van Leeuwen 2008, 118). This cautionary tale (i.e. a type of mythopoesis) in which the "protagonists engage in deviant actions that lead to unhappy endings" (van Leeuwen 2008) is supported throughout the texts (both verbal and visual) and serves as a major legitimation for the harsh sentences doled out.

Besides Judge Jerry Baxter, other authorities are also called on to legitimize the severe punishments of the teachers. The following examples from the texts demonstrate how moral evaluation converges with authorization (van Leeuwen 2008) to position the teachers as evil enemies:

Text 4: "**Anything that you can imagine that could involve cheating** – it was done," he said at the time. (Said by Former Attorney General Michael Bowers)

Text 4: "**We've been fighting** for the children in **our** community, particularly those children who were deprived by this cheating scandal," Howard said. (Said by District Attorney Paul Howard)

Both examples demonstrate authorization because the journalist chooses to include quotations from two expert sources of legal authority (vs. education experts), a former

Attorney General and a current Attorney General. By including these two quotations, the journalist reinforces the judge as a legitimate authority in positioning the teachers as guilty and the children as innocent victims. In addition to the use of authorization, the journalist shows moral evaluation through the use of three linguistic strategies: the use of hyperbole together with the negative action of the teachers (e.g. "Anything that you can imagine that could involve cheating – *it was done*"); the use of a war metaphor (e.g. "*We've been fighting for the children in our community*"); and the use of deixis (e.g. "*We've been fighting for the children in our community*"). These strategies work together to unify the public in their contempt of the teachers. Taken together, this is an example of van Dijk's principle of the "ideological square" (1997, p. 30) in which one group is positioned as inherently good and moral and another group – pitted in opposition to the first – is positioned as inherently bad and morally questionable.

In addition to the use of quotations as a form of legitimation, the journalist also uses indirect reports to recontextualize the events in the journalist's words, as in the following examples:

Text 2: Judge Jerry Baxter **urged** educators convicted of racketeering charges in the Atlanta Public Schools cheating trial to take a deal, **but only two** out of the 10 defendants being sentenced **took that advice**.

Text 2: Cleveland became the only one of the former educators to **elude** jail time.

In the first example, the journalist's lexical choice of **urged** sets up the speech act as one in which the judge is acting on behalf of the offenders. His magnanimous gesture of offering this deal comes with the small price of admitting guilt, but it was precisely because the teachers did not see themselves solely responsible for the cheating events that they did not take the plea deal. However, the journalist's moral evaluation of the teachers, conveyed in the phrases **but only two** and **took that advice**, suggests the teachers' culpability which resulted in the judge's harsh sentences. Not constrained by the conventions for the use of quoting (i.e. *said*) in the above examples, the journalist creates a discursive space where much of the (invisible) ideological work is done. In this way, the evaluative indirect reports made above reflect a particular ideology that blames the teachers for the "Cheating Scandal" events.

In the final example, the cautionary tale takes a dramatic turn:

Text 3: There was **nothing routine** about a sentencing hearing Tuesday in Atlanta that **wrote the final legal chapter** of one of the most **massive** school cheating scandals in the country. **One by one, they stood**, alongside their attorneys, before **Fulton County Superior Court Judge Jerry Baxter**. In this system, a jury decides **guilt** or **innocence**, the **judge metes** out punishment....When verdicts were reached, he ordered them directly to jail. But on Monday he changed his mind and decided to allow prosecutors to offer them deals that would have allowed them to avoid the possible 20-year sentence that racketeering carries. And that's why there were sparks when some of the educators, flanked by their attorneys, did not directly and readily **admit their responsibility**.

In the example above, the journalist sets the stage for the story as **nothing routine**. Using dramatic language, more typical of a cowboy Western reminiscent of Sergio Leone's "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", she describes the events metaphorically as **the final legal chapter**, uses hyperbole to exaggerate its impact (e.g. **massive**), and describes the teachers waiting for sentencing as **one by one, they stood, alongside their attorneys**. At this

point, the reader can almost see the teachers lining up to face their enemy, *Fulton County Superior Court Judge Jerry Baxter*. The use of the full honorifics (as opposed to the more simple Judge Baxter, or Judge Jerry Baxter, as in other articles) is significant, and provides authority, importance, and status that suggest "a degree of respect" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 82). The journalist then reviews the role of the jury (deciding **guilt or innocence**), noting that the judge is the one that **metes out** punishment. Defined as "dispensing or allotting justice", to **mete out** is an example of intertextuality and the intermingling of Biblical references in the re-telling of the story (e.g. "with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" – *Matthew 7:2*). The judge is then credited for *allowing* the teachers to avoid the harsh punishment if they would only admit their responsibility, which presupposes they are guilty.

In the process of recontextualizing the sentencing as a cautionary tale and quasicow-boy-Western-meets-Biblical-narrative-of-good-vs.-evil-and-redemption, the teachers themselves are re-constructed for the reader in terms of what they do and who they are. Below are two examples that depict what the teachers were shown doing:

Text 3: Michael Bowers, a former Georgia Attorney General who investigated the cheating scandal, said in 2013 that there were "**cheating parties**"...

Text 1: The 11 were found guilty of **racketeering** charges while a twelfth educator was acquitted of racketeering, the Associated Press reported.

In the first example, the teachers are described as having had **cheating parties**, a metonymy which substitutes a social event for a work event. The word **parties** calls up images of teachers reveling at a happy celebration, one that is purely social and frivolous. It suggests a sense of glee on the part of the teachers, which works to intensify their irresponsibility almost to the point of perversion. This metonymy is so subtle that it almost goes unnoticed, inviting the reader to assume that the teachers were the ones who described the gatherings this way, rather than the Attorney General who was the one who coined this phrase in reference to the teacher's actions.

In the second example, the teachers are once again shown in negative actions, in this case **racketeering**. The use of the metonymy **racketeering** is significant because it immediately criminalizes their actions, equating them with the mobsters and organized crime syndicates typically charged with this crime. Although nine instances in the articles were found that refer to the teachers being charged with racketeering, there is no explanation of how or why the teachers could be charged with this particular crime. More than this, there is a notable irony in the charge of racketeering being applied to elementary school teachers given that racketeering is, by definition, when an organization makes money through illegal activities. While rumors abound about the many ways that these teachers might have financially benefitted from cheating, no financial gain was had. Furthermore, implied in the crime of racketeering is the understanding that the people within the organization are *professionals*. Anyone who studies education, education policy, or education history knows that one of the very central struggles for teachers, especially elementary teachers (often middle-class females), is the struggle to be considered a professional in the first place. And indeed, under the education reform movement, teachers have arguably never been *more* deprofessionalized and deskilled as they wither under accountability pressures, canned curricula, and high-stakes testing (Hirsch 2005, 2013).

The repetition of the racketeering charges returns a sense of spectacle to the teachers' punishment (Foucault 1977). Fiske references this return to the spectacle by pointing to the conundrum that modern news sources face in meeting the criteria of education and social responsibility while reconciling it with the "practices and pleasures of popular taste" (2010, 156). In his work on popular news, Fiske notes that this conflict has been largely resolved through a trend in US media (such as in *USA Today*) of moving toward the criteria of entertainment and popular pleasure and away from that of education and social responsibility. The excerpts above illustrate this trend toward sensationalization and the framing of news in terms of entertainment (rather than educational) value. Cheating is mundane; racketeering is titillating.

In addition to the substitutions for what the teachers did, it is also useful to attend to the lexical choices used to refer to the teachers. In our analysis of the naming of the teachers, we found that 28% of the instances referring to the teachers used the term *former educator/teacher*. We believe that the word *educator* (as opposed to *teacher*) was used primarily because it encompasses any professional staff working with the students. However, the honorific *educator* foregrounds the holy shrine of moral responsibility that teachers have supposedly corrupted through their **cheating parties** and participation in organized crime. Furthermore, the use of *former* is significant in that it marks how teachers (whose careers often spanned 30 years or more) were quickly and repeatedly stripped of their status as educators. By placing the word *former* in front of their official title, administrators and officials responsible for their employment no longer have to take responsibility. In addition to the frequent use of the word *former*, we found 15 instances which quantified the teachers, highlighting the number of teachers convicted or sentenced such as in the following: *nearly a dozen educators; former Atlanta educators; a twelfth educator; the 35 educators; 10 former Atlanta Public School's educators; 180 educators; five school-level educators; 11 convicted educators; an 11th convicted former teacher; five teachers*. Note that besides the use of *former*, many instances also included reference to teachers' legal status, highlighting their deviant nature with words such as *convicted* and *guilty*.

In addition to the repetition of words referring to the teachers and their crimes, there was also the repetition of words and phrases that complemented and supported the moral tale laid out by the journalists. For example, the word *chapter* was repeated five times:

Text 3: There was nothing routine about a sentencing hearing Tuesday in Atlanta that wrote the **final legal chapter** of one of the most massive school cheating scandals in the country.

Text 4: Statement from former Gov. Sonny Perdue: "Today's verdict marks the **end of a dark chapter** for Atlanta Public Schools, but **it is not the final chapter**."

Text 4: Statement from Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed: "The APS cheating scandal marked one of the darkest periods in the life of our city. I am hopeful that with the jury's verdict today, **we can finally close this chapter** and move forward with the education and development of our young people."

Text 4: The Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education also released a statement saying: "This has been **a sad and tragic chapter** for Atlanta Public Schools that has now come to a close."

The repeated metaphor of crime as a moral tale – conveyed through the comparison of the cheating events to a chapter in a book – is another example of episodic framing in that a

chapter is a finite, contained unit. It can be finished and put away without attending to the rest of the chapters which would shed light on the larger context of education reform and high-stakes testing.

Another example of journalistic evaluation in the recontextualization of the events can be seen in the newscaster's words in Text 1 (*NBC News*). After hearing the story as reported by a journalist on the scene, she makes the following closing statement:

Text 1 (from video): Isn't that discouraging? Think about teachers cheating – terrible.

The newscaster's admonishment focuses on the teachers (as opposed to the overtesting of children or the severity of the sentencing). Furthermore, her use of the rhetorical question *Isn't that discouraging?* invites the viewer to agree with her. Her blatant editorializing not only presupposes the one dimensionality of the issue, but also packages a complicated set of events in the simplistic and evaluative language of *discouraging* and *terrible*.

A final note about the verbal recontextualization of the events of the "Cheating Scandal" is the occlusion of important aspects, namely the reasons why teachers refused to accept plea deals that would have drastically reduced their sentence, nor are we given any explanation as to why they cheated. The following examples show how the teachers are presented as negligent in taking responsibility, but also show how the judge advances a positive self-presentation while constructing a negative other-presentation of the teachers:

Text 2: "This was very, very remarkable, to have the judge sort of give the defendants a second chance," said Ron Carlson, University of Georgia law professor emeritus. "The thing that maybe was a little surprising was **the reticence of the defendants to step forward and do that.**"

Text 2: (Said by Judge Baxter in video) All I want from any of these people is just to **take some responsibility**, but **they refuse, they refuse.**

Text 3: "This is the time to search your soul," Baxter said. "It's just taking responsibility.... **No one has taken** responsibility that I can see."

The above examples illustrate, once more, van Dijk's principle of the ideological square (1997) as well as the episodic framing of the "Cheating Scandal" events in which individuals are made to take responsibility for systemic societal conditions. Therefore, the issues (in this case, the high-stakes climate that supports corporate interests, and the education reform movement as a whole) are made invisible and irrelevant. In addition, these comments are just some of the many examples in this paper of how news media events become staged as spectacles (Cottle 2009) and how elite forces (e.g. private corporations) stand to benefit from them (Klein 2007).

5.2. Visual representation of teachers

As in the verbal recontextualization, visual elements also re-construct the "Cheating Scandal" events.³ Legitimation of the sentencing is the first salient visual feature worth examining, and numerous elements in the texts illustrate how the authority of the judge is used to legitimate his actions (shown by his high location in the courtroom and judge's robes). In addition, Screenshot 1 shows how the judge's facial expression of condemnation accompanied by his exaggerated hand gestures legitimates the sentencing (by showing his physical

outrage at their behavior) and morally evaluates the behavior of the teachers.

Many substitutions also occurred in the visual recontextualization of the events. One of the most salient substitutions of elements of the actual practice with semiotic elements is the repetition and frequent appearance of the mugshots of the teachers to stand for the teachers. In fact, at the end of Text 4, there is even a link that viewers can click on to view the mugshot (through a gallery) of each individual teacher as seen in Screenshot 2. In most of the texts, all of the teachers' mugshots appeared together.

In Screenshot 3, the teachers' faces appear (in quick bursts) in front of a blurred black and white background that appears to be a courtroom, a shot typical of street crime reports where mugshots of criminals are flashed on the screen as their crimes are reported. This placement of the teachers in a classic crime frame visual immediately naturalizes their charges as criminal because this is the way that street crime is generally reported (Catalano and Waugh 2013). Such framing is particularly dangerous because it adds to stereotypes perpetuated in the media. Media scholars support this finding, noting the overrepresentation of Black people in crime discourse and their associations with deviance in the media (e.g., Dixon and Maddox 2005; Gilliam et al. 1996; Iyengar 1991; Oliver 2003; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer 1998; Welch 2007). As with all episodic framing, context is omitted and sentencing is forefronted, conveying a simple message: "teachers are criminals".

As Lashmar noted, "the photo serves as an index of an ideological theme" (2014, 3). The normalizing gaze of the mugshot "establishes a visibility through which one differentiates and judges" the offenders (Foucault 1977, 25). According to Foucault, the punishment has to be seen to be effective, and thus the mugshot, which "was established as a means of spectacle, shame and punishment" (Lashmar 2014, 21) works efficiently to do this. In his detailed analysis of mugshots as semiotic resources, Lashmar (2014) found that the format varies little and, according to Tagg, "subjects are isolated in a shallow contained space; turned full face and subjected to an unreturnable gaze; illuminated, focused, measured, numbered and named; forced to yield to the minutest scrutiny of gestures and features" (1988, 64). In fact, mugshots in the USA are so notorious and readily available that UK tabloids frequently use them "as a free freak show so they can jeer at the spectacle" (Lashmar 2014, 26). Lashmar also notes that mugshots are increasingly used in disturbing ways and that this process separates society rather than bringing it together inciting "schadenfreude, the thrill, the derision and the fear when the subject is pictured" (Lashmar 2014.). This 24-hour news coverage of the "Cheating Scandal" events pictured here creates "a modern version of the medieval spectacle" described in Foucault's *Discipline & Punish*. Hence we begin to judge the criminal, not the crime. In addition, the mugshots help to justify alienation and lack of empathy on the part of the viewer, since they are invited to observe and participate in the subjects' shaming. Finally, the mugshots provide an episodic framing of the events, in essence, a snapshot of the punishment and shame that will remain forever in the minds of the viewers, essentially erasing the context in the process.

Besides the repetition of the mugshots, other visual elements such as teachers in handcuffs and the presence of law enforcement are repeated in every article and video of this analysis as seen in our examples in Appendix 1, which connote law and order and the apprehension of offenders.

These examples facilitate the placing of events in the frame of crime and support the overlexicalization found in the verbal analysis. This reduces teachers to criminals who have been caught and who refuse to take responsibility. Other semiotic elements that substituted for the actual practice include the use of the red graphic letters *racketeering* in the video (see Screenshot 6 in Appendix 1). Note that instances of *racketeering* in the verbal texts were frequent, but the other semiotic elements add much to the overall meaning of the video.

In Screenshot 6, the charges against the teachers (in quotation marks) are flashed in big, fat, red letters (followed by the audio saying *charges normally reserved for putting away violent mobsters*). In the background, the defendants sit with a police officer standing above them and in a much higher position in the frame's layout. In the photo beneath the red letters, teachers are depicted with a downward camera angle, their eyes looking either at the ground or straight ahead. Symbolically, the camera angle is significant. The downward angle placed on the defendants is metaphorical for looking down on someone; the teachers are depicted in a subordinate position as opposed to the police officer who stands above them. This is important because the teachers are shown as disempowered corrupters of innocent children. The police officer, on the other hand, is the recipient of an upward camera angle, which symbolically grants her a higher status than the defendants below her. Besides the defendants and policewoman in the courtroom setting, the typeface and color of the words *racketeering* also have meaning potential. The red color (associated with blood and violence in the genre of crime) and lack of modulation (suggesting a simplified world, and large fat letters signifying increased weight of the crime) add to the overall message and serious tone (Machin 2007).

Screenshot 7 shows how the teachers' actions were, once more, simplified and decontextualized: Screenshot 7 is set against a background and white typeface iconic of schooling, with an answer sheet metonymic of the tests themselves. The green background and typeface call to mind the handwritten words a teacher might write on a chalkboard, and thus connect the events to the teachers in question. As each of the words *altered*, *fabricated*, and *falsely certified* appears separately on the screen (intensifying their impact), they act as a skeleton that attempts to quantify the actions of the teachers when they are essentially referring to the one action in which they have been accused: cheating. These images act as visual sound bites, created to help readers digest complicated information easily. Episodic reporting such as this makes good pictures, taking the complex and multi-faceted issue of assessment in schools and breaking it into concrete instances in which only the negative actions of teachers are featured. As a result, the reasons why teachers would want to take these actions are completely erased from the reports, and teachers' perspectives on the issue are not presented. In the final example (again a screenshot from Text 3), the video features mugshots of the three defendants who received the harshest sentences. Then, graphically, the prison bars close in front of their faces as the faces disappear, and the giant yellow letters *7 years* appear in front of the bars as the audio says *7 years in prison*.

In Screenshot 7, the highlighting of the bright yellow number in front of a dark background gives more salience to the number, which effectively reduces quality to quantity, and helps us to "understand reality more cheaply" (Barthes [1957] 2012, 268). Aggregation such as this (pointed out in the verbal analysis as well) lends credibility to an overarching

narrative that highlights the criminal nature of (Black) teachers that can be justified through the foregrounding of the quantity being arrested and sentenced.

6. Conclusion

Our analyses revealed that the interaction of multimodal elements in the data unfairly represented the Atlanta teachers. We showed that the media coverage disproportionately employed episodic framing to position teachers as criminals, omitting the background context that would have revealed the unjust nature of their trial and sentencing. That is, instead of saying “these are the events we are in the middle of”, the reporting of events merely tells us “what happened today” (Fiske 2010, 159). In the verbal analysis of the recontextualization of “Cheating Scandal” events, we showed how the journalists used legitimization, moral evaluation, repetition, and substitution to present the teachers as strong agents in their negative actions, to legitimize the harsh (and unprecedented) sentences, and to tell a moral tale that occluded the larger policy issues (i.e. test-based retention), thus simplifying a very complicated story. Similarly, in the visual analysis, we found that journalists used visual elements such as mugshots, color, typeface, and other semiotic elements to emphasize negative characteristics of teachers. The repeated shots of teachers in handcuffs, police officers, mugshots, and prison bars cannot be underestimated in their power to shape the viewers’ thinking patterns (Littlemore 2015). Taken together, the visual elements combined with the moral narrative found in the verbal analysis reify viewers’ perceptions of teachers as the central problem in education, supporting Cottle’s (2009) findings that news media have a formidable role in shaping the public’s opinion of social issues.

Although our analysis deals with a US context, the phenomenon of representing marginalized groups negatively in crime reports (to the benefit of groups in power) is universal (Catalano and Waugh 2013). We hope that by providing an in-depth, multimodal analysis of the mechanisms by which this occurs, we can help to sensitize people to the number of (subtle) ways that bias is created and sustained through media representation of education, schools, and teachers. We urge people to denaturalize mainstream media’s framing of educational issues and advance alternative frames to depict teachers, and we encourage more critical scholarship on teaching and education, particularly where such ideological agendas are at work. This will not only help us restore history, contestations, and context, but will also expose what is currently hidden, especially as it relates to the central question: who benefits from these negative representations?

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Notes

1. Although the teachers were sentenced for 5–20 years (depending on the individual), the most any of the teachers will serve in prison is 7 years. Since the sentencing of teachers, a “Redemption Academy” has been formed to “help students affected by the cheating,” and it has been reported that some of the convicted teachers will serve their community hours tutoring students at this academy (Guilty verdicts 2015).
2. All direct quotations from the texts are shown in italics. Bold words are the authors’ emphasis, and highlight elements discussed in the analysis.
3. Please see Appendix 1 to view visual elements examined in this section.

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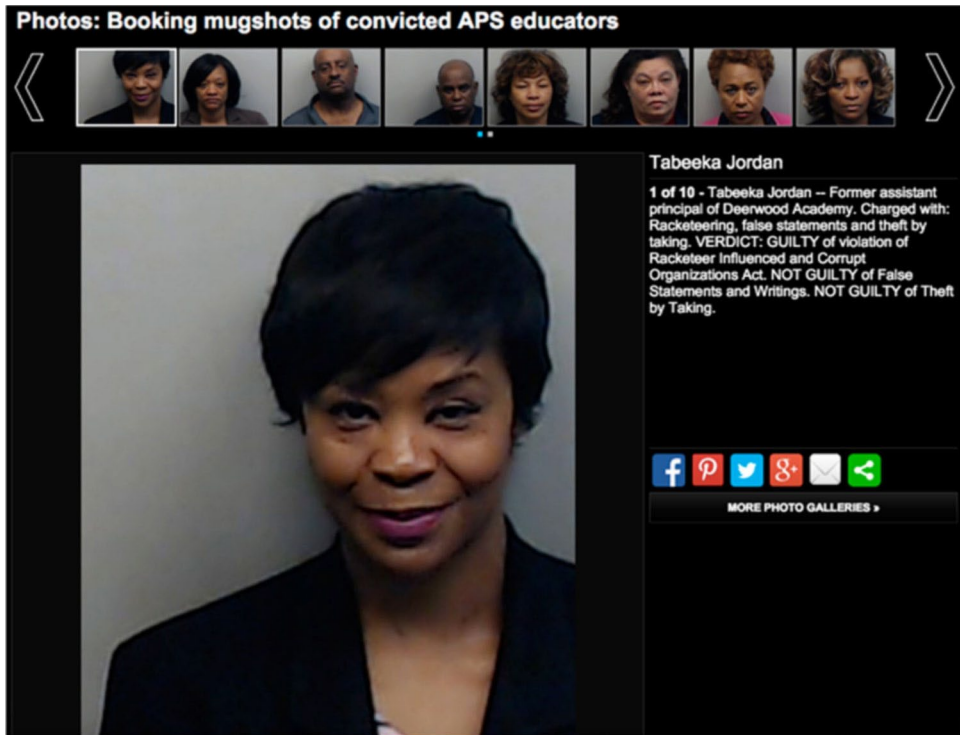
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Appendix 1. Figures



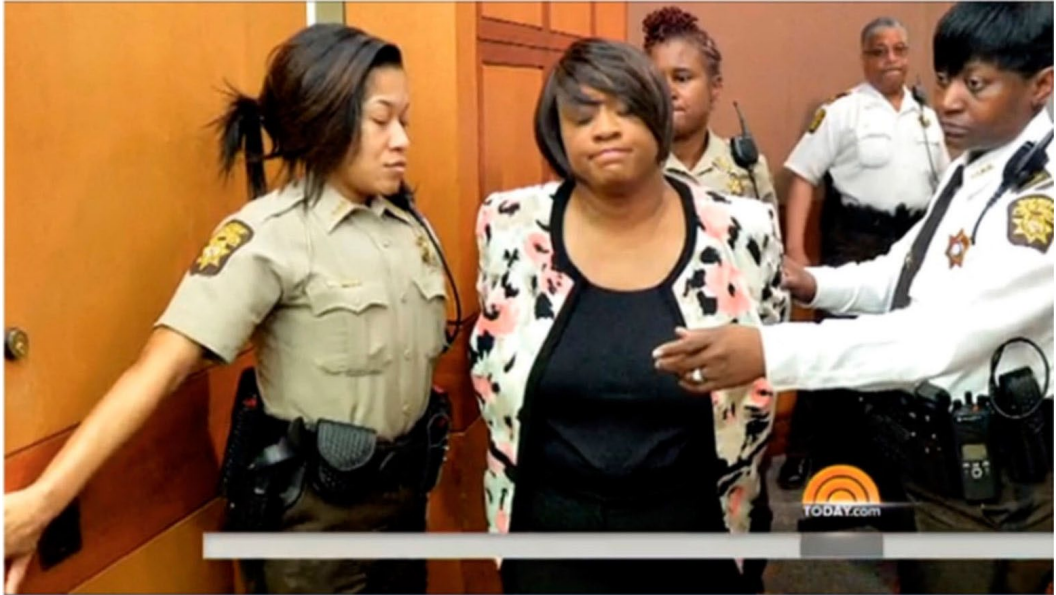
Screenshot 1: (timestamp 0.28 seconds) Everybody in APS knew that cheating was going on and your client promoted it (hand goes up on promoted it)



Screenshot 2: (from photo gallery, Text 4 click on this link to view the full gallery: <http://www.wsbtv.com/gallery/news/local-education/photos-booking-mugshots-convicted-aps-educators/gCRww/>)



Screenshot 3: (timestamp: 0.19 seconds): 11 out of 12 defendants convicted Monday....



Screenshot 4: (timestamp: 0.20 seconds) *concluding a trial that lasted....*



Screenshot 5: (timestamp 0.21 seconds) *more than six months....*



Screenshot 6: (timestamp 0.35 seconds) punishments for the crime of racketeering....



Screenshot 7: (timestamp 0.58 seconds)...the educators altered, fabricated and falsely certified test answers



Screenshot 8: (timestamp 1.03 seconds) *7 years in prison.....*

Appendix 2. Texts used in the corpus

Text 1: Chuck, E. 2015. "Atlanta Public School Educators Found Guilty in Cheating Scandal." *NBC News.com*. April 2.

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/atlanta-public-school-educators-found-guilty-cheating-scandal-n334121>

Text 2: Lowry, D. 2015. "All but one in Atlanta cheating scandal to serve time." *USA Today.com*. April 14.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/14/atlanta-educators-sentenced/25759985/>

Text 3: 2015. "Prison time for some Atlanta school educators in cheating scandal." *CNN.com*. April 15.

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/14/us/georgia-atlanta-public-schools-cheating-scandal-verdicts/>

Text 4: 2015. "Guilty verdicts reached for 11 of 12 in APS cheating trial." *wsbtv.com*. April 2.

<http://www.wsbtv.com/news/news/local/verdicts-aps-cheating-trial/nkdRN/>