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## Education in Changing Times: How to Identify and Rehabilitate Issues in Education Post-Crisis

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Education in Changing Times:  
How to Identify and Rehabilitate Issues in Education Post-Crisis

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature and Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## **Dedication**

To all my students and campers and swimmers, past and present and future, you all are the reason I'm doing this.



## **Acknowledgments**

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My best friends who are busy finishing their degrees but still cheered me on to the finish line - I am so proud of you both and am so thankful to know you

My platonic partner who made sure I took care of myself and didn't skip out on necessary self-care - I love you and am so happy for your help

My grandfather, who passed before I finished the project but was always a staunch supporter of me and my education - I miss you dearly but know you would have been proud

And to anyone reading this, thank you for picking up my writing and I hope you enjoy it even a little bit.

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### **Abstract**

Modern US education post-pandemic is facing issues with students far behind pre-pandemic. This paper investigates this issue through two lenses: Psychology and Classical Studies. Within the Psychology lens deficits in academic achievement, socioemotional development, and accessibility emerge as key issues. Educational Psychology presents potential solutions with a learning theory named Constructivism emerging as the theory with the best possible implementation and supporting evidence for solving the specific issues post-pandemic. Within the Classical lens one thinker from Late Antiquity, St. Augustine, lived within a time with similarities to the current problem and wrote on teaching. Past literature did not adequately cover Augustine as an educational thinker, so this paper applies a modern educational lens to Augustine using ideas from the Psychology portion to synthesize his educational thinking in modern vernacular. This thinking is similar to Constructivism, providing further evidence that this is the path forward for modern US education.



**Introduction: A Joint Psychology and Classical Studies Project: How Did I Even Get Here?**

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## Reasoning

This project is the culmination of four years in two majors that very few would choose to do jointly. I came to Bard originally planning on just doing Psychology and then going straight into an Educational Psychology graduate program after. Obviously, things changed. I rediscovered my love for the dead language of Latin and for translation, for the field of Classics and how it runs so differently from Psychology. This is not to say that they don't have any similarities, because that's the whole point of this project to begin with. I always wanted to do these majors jointly, and so I did. There is no one discipline, one area of knowledge, that humans construct that is wholly separate from that of the others. That is a belief I live by, and will defend with everything I do. So, to me, this project is me attempting to prove that these disciplines which I admit look very different on the surface and in how they operate, have inherent ties through other fields and even just directly to each other.

I am also a 4+1 Master in Teaching student at Bard. Around a month after I submit this senior project, I will begin my Masters program to hopefully become certified to teach 7-12th grade English Literature. This project is my attempt to pull my three disciplines together: Psychology, Classical Studies, and Education. I came up with the idea for this project after years in childcare and seeing just how different kids were after the pandemic. As a future teacher, seeing that is a bit terrifying. What I see on the news is little better, with 12.8% of teachers leaving their district entirely in 2022-23(ERS 2024) and all the headlines are messages of education failing students. I wanted to take my senior project as a time for me to use the skills and areas of knowledge I honed within my undergraduate years to come up with a solution to the problems the field I will be stepping into in my future poses. I want to see what answers these fields will give me and if I can use them to create a more concrete answer for my own future use.

## Method

I cannot do a project in two fields that work vastly differently without spending a moment discussing my methodology. This paper will have three chapters: Psychology, Classics, and Synthesis. The exact details for what those chapters will be I will cover shortly, but for now I want to lay out the difference in how I am organizing the actual paper. For the psychology portion, I'm using APA style which is standard. For Classics, I will change to using MLA. Originally, I was thinking of maybe also doing APA citations, until I realized that Classics utilizes far fewer sources and the page numbers are far more important in this field than they are for Psychology. Classical Studies papers also use footnotes where footnotes are a very rare sight in APA, so MLA seemed like the best option to be able to properly represent the sources and style that should be used in a Classical studies context even if the change itself may be a bit jarring. The Synthesis portion is closer to MLA than APA, but there are no in-text citations because of the way it was written, so it's not a huge concern to outline.

The Bibliography is done in APA style because of the far larger amount of Psychology sources compared to that of the Classical sources, so it seemed to make more sense for that to be the case. That's just more of a numbers game, along with the fact that I call out the names for all the sources I use in the Classics section directly so people would not need to go to the bibliography to find the titles, while for the Psychology section I rarely ever do.

## Chapters

The first chapter, the Psychology chapter, is about the current issue we see in education post-COVID and what Psychology as a field might point to as an answer. The first section of the chapter is on what the point of education, specifically US public education, is and how that came about so I could better create a framework for if education is failing in the first place. The history

of public education, Psychology in public education, and what Americans have held historically to be the values of education are covered to synthesize an answer to what American education should be and do. The second section is making and operationalizing a set of criteria to weigh the current state of education against to see where it may be falling behind and what exactly needs to be improved. Academic achievement, socioemotional development, and accessibility are the three criteria pulled out to represent a successful education. I operationalize these using various studies and data to determine where and how the education system is currently falling behind post-pandemic. The final section is an exploration into the field of Educational Psychology to see if there are any existing theories or recommendations that may provide concrete solutions that could be implemented to solve the issues determined in the last section.

The second chapter, the Classical Studies chapter, is my search into the other field I studied in to see if perhaps any thinkers I've read or learned about faced a similar issue in the past and might have recommendations on what I should do now in the current moment. A looking into the past to help shape a better future sort of idea. I believe a holistic approach using multiple fields is more likely to give me a fully satisfying answer, especially if the other field I use may have an already tried and true one. I could have chosen to talk about Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle, giants of philosophy and influential theorists of education. But I instead chose Saint Augustine of Hippo, a foundational figure of Christian theology and culture from Late Antiquity. I was drawn to him not for his thoughts, but rather, for his circumstances. Augustine lived at a time when the dominant culture, Roman, was falling to the side while the new culture, Christianity, was on a rapid rise and he was caught in the middle of it. He was a student of classical education, a teacher of rhetoric, and finally a Christian educator. He is afforded a special classification of experiencing both what it was like to be a student and a teacher of both

the major “educations” of his time, lead by the two different cultures, and wrote on both so prolifically that those interested in the Christianization of Roman education still productively analyze his words to this day.

This second chapter looks at how Augustine has been analyzed by critics to see what the opinion of him as an educator has been in the past. I look at three writers who together span 74 years of Augustinian studies: Henri Irénée Marrou, Robert Kaster, and Jan Stenger. I investigate how each talk about Augustine in reference to education and discover how, until Stenger, no critics really thought of Augustine as an educational reformer or educational theorist. Marrou and Kaster use Augustine more as a primary source for information about his own experiences with being a student than him as someone who taught and was an educator himself. Even Stenger, who does give Augustine credit as an educational thinker, doesn’t actually relate him to anything modern for a useful benchmark or to bring his thoughts to modern times.

Finally, the third chapter is synthesis. Given how Augustine hasn’t been analyzed in an educational sense, or a psychological sense in regards to his education, my third chapter is just that. I translate and analyze some of Augustine’s writings on education from a psychological perspective, specifically an Educational Psychology perspective. I then pull out the pieces that may be useful for me to implement as a teacher in the modern day, based on how Augustine chose to approach issues like learning or educational reform during another time of post-crisis or post-change. I end the chapter by comparing the answer I got from Augustine to the answer I got from Psychology, and make some ideas on how I could use these answers in my steps forward as an educator as I leave my undergraduate studies and begin my graduate ones.

## Chapter 1: Post-COVID Educational Crisis: What Does Psychology Say We Should Do?

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## **Introduction**

When you look into the news within the last 4 years about education, it's not uncommon to find headlines like "Scathing new report says American schools are 'failing the COVID generation'" or "America's Education System Is a Mess, and It's Students Who Are Paying the Price". Online discourses are full of discussions about how education is being handled, who it's failing, and what the curriculum even should include. Critical race theory, the banning of books, and the censoring of sexual education are just a few hot topics on what modern education should even do. In our society, what function does education serve? This is such a large question because it could be taken in many different routes. There's discussion to be had about the content of what's being taught, how much of it, or when. There are debates on the methodology of teaching, the types of assessments that are valid, or whether assessments should be used at all. There are questions about the actual system of education, what it may uphold, or how it may underprivilege certain students and privilege others. These are more topics than can feasibly be tackled in a project such as this one with satisfactory depth and analysis. So instead, I want to investigate the one question that I could genuinely attempt to implement in my future as an educator: How should education be conducted in this post or amid crisis moment?

## **The COVID Issue**

Much of this debate has been only aggravated by COVID, as seen by the news article mentioned above naming how education is specifically failing the "COVID generation". The COVID generation is a hot topic, with 566 studies appearing mentioning the subject on PsycINFO alone, and for good reason. COVID-19 ravaged the United States and continues to even as I write this in 2024. Over a million people have died, with more than 100 million cases in the United States alone (New York Times, 2023). COVID causes a variety of health risks,

including the risk of Long COVID, which can affect a person neurologically as well as physically (CDC, 2024). Perhaps it's no surprise then that education too took serious blows. With the shutdowns in March 2020, it would not be until the Fall of 2021 that most schools reopened with in-person learning, albeit commonly modified (IES, 2022). Schools' solution to these shutdowns was to change the way they instructed, namely attempting online schooling at a scale never seen before (IES, 2022). The effects of this sudden and rapid switch in learning mode can be still seen. Even 4 years after the start of the pandemic, students are still scoring lower than pre-COVID average scores in both reading and math (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023).

We sit now at a crossroads for American Education. In a time post-crisis, how should our education system approach trying to ensure that our students are effectively learning at the rate they were before COVID hit? Can we improve our system so our students do even better than pre-pandemic students? How do we redefine education to address this massive change that hit our culture and society? How do we ensure education is educating?

### **History of American Education**

First off, defining what education is trying to do would be helpful to figure out how to do it. Here, I think a deep dive into the history of education and psychology's formational role in how it acts and functions today can illuminate the key details. I should specify before beginning that there is a specific definition I am using to approach my question of education in post-crisis, and that is that education refers to the large public system of education that exists in the United States. There is a rich history and current climate for topics like private schools, musical education, and homeschooling (Murphy, 2014, Urquiola, 2016). However, I believe that focusing on the education that most children will receive, with 81.9% of children being in public school in 2021 (Fabina et al., 2021), will be a better assessment of the state of education in the US just



given the number of students receiving that type of education. Henceforth, public schooling, its history, and current data will be centralized. I may make some mentions of private schooling if the data is pertinent or mentioned within a study as relevant supporting evidence.

Public education in the United States came about starting in the 19th century, with the movement for a type of school known as a Common School. Common schools were meant to educate children – white children – in reading, writing, arithmetic, and moral teachings (Amatullah et al., 2023, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Ornstein & Levine, 2007). These schools differed from the other sorts of schooling offered at the time for two reasons: They were state or tax-funded and they were available to any white child regardless of socioeconomic status. Other schools that existed at this time were all privately funded, primarily for wealthy children, or ran out of churches to provide religious education (Kidd et al., 2021, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Ornstein & Levine, 2007). Advocates for Common schools argued that those schools did not adequately achieve what education was capable of. The ideas of what education could or should achieve were varied from education making immigrant children from Europe more American, education being the path to creating a more prosperous country as Horace Mann believed, or promoting community among Americans (Kober & Rentner, 2020, Ornstein & Levine, 2007). Education was seen as a path to prosperity as reformers believed that it would allow children from nonwealthy backgrounds to gain better jobs and that it could negate some of the negative effects of poverty like crime and promote happiness and fulfillment in the American populace (Kidd et al., 2021, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Ornstein & Levine, 2007). Overall, however, there was a message that the goal of education was to promote community or foster good relationships, and set children up to ensure the prosperity of the nation.

**Horace Mann**

Horace Mann was one of the key figures that led to the expansion of public education in the United States. A politician from Massachusetts, he was a firm abolitionist and promoter of welfare and was known as a reformer. He spent most of his life pushing for and actively making laws to further the expansion of Common Schools, as he saw them as the answer to many issues (Downs, 1974, Gibbon, 2002). Chiefly, he believed that all children should receive an equal education and that Common Schools should teach reading, writing, math, and most importantly to Mann: build a moral character. Mann believed that through education, issues of class, poverty, and violence would be solved. In his Twelfth Annual Report of the Massachusetts School Board in 1848, Mann said that “education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men--the balance-wheel of the social machinery....But I mean that it gives each man the independence and the means, by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich; it prevents being poor”. He believed that schools would give students the ability to both resist committing crimes and also raise themselves up economically. He said in the same report that “the spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society”. Mann essentially saw education as the tool to use in order to bring about community and raise the general social class. There was a lot of discussion on wealth and class in Mann’s time, and one of the chief arguments against education was its economic function, and the influences of that can be seen in Mann’s speech on how it would raise the general norm of the average US citizen.

Specifically on the note of the Common Schools encouraging moral character and lessening crime, in the Common School Journal which Mann helped edit and publish, in January of 1841, Mann said that “The Common School is the institution which can receive and train up children in the elements of all good knowledge, and of virtue, before they are subjected to the alienating competitions of life...Let the Common School be expanded to its capabilities...and nine tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be more inviolate by night; property, life, and character held by a stronger tenure; all rational hopes respecting the future brightened timeline”. He saw the Common School as the answer to almost all wrongs in society, believing that if every man was educated they could simply just live and acquire wealth and live happily. Or very simply, the common schools taught manners, and as he said in the Common School Journal in 1847, “manners easily and rapidly mature into morals”. He was the Common School’s strongest supporter and furthered the spread of public education to the point that he is known as the father of US public education.

### **Rise of the Common School**

But Mann’s expansions for public schools were not passed without difficulty. The Common School movement experienced pushback from various taxpayers or parents when it was first popularized, who raised the issues of it being state-funded, removing children from the workforce, and the debate over the inclusion of marginalized children (Downs, 1974, Kidd et al., 2021, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Neem, 2017). Nevertheless, within the next century, it would spread to numerous states and the appearance of state-funded schools began to become the new normal. Because of the 10th amendment, which states that any issue not outlined in the constitution as being delegated to the federal government is governed by the states, most

educational law is handled at the state level, and so the spread of public education varied heavily on a state-by-state basis. It gained more traction in higher-population areas, but would eventually spread to rural communities as well. These schools would become cultural hubs for their communities, funded by taxes from the community itself (Kober & Rentner, 2020, Neem 2017). This is still true to this day, however, it has now become a hot topic in terms of educational inequities as local communities have become more segregated by race and socioeconomic class thanks to issues like redlining (Ark, 2020, Ferreira, 2001, Orfield & Lee, 2005).

From here, the structure that is used today began to emerge. Elementary schools would become more commonplace in the late 19th century, while high school would not start to be seen as necessary until the 20th century. The 20th century would see education becoming mandatory for all children from elementary school until 16 years of age, along with the expansion of the amount of public schools. However, it wasn't until the later 20th century that education would even begin to open up to African American or disabled folks after several bills and acts were passed to try and promote all people receiving a fair education (Amatullah et al., 2023, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Neem 2017, Ornstein & Levine, 2007).

### **Psychology in Early Public School Education**

And within all of this, a rise in psychology's presence in education can be seen. The goal of public education, as championed by the Common School movement and as said by the United States Department of Education, is to promote educational success and equal opportunity to a quality education (ED, 2011). Psychology provided ways to measure these goals in tangible and understandable data and timelines, namely through ideas of child development. There is a field within Psychology called School Psychology, whose entire purpose is to bring the ideas of psychology into the classroom setting. This field was recognized only a few decades ago, though

it began in the early 19th century, and is primarily credited to being invented by a man named Lightner Witmer. The father of clinical psychology as well, Witmer studied students as individuals who henceforth had individual differences. He took students as case studies and wanted to see why they failed or succeeded on a personal level, also known as the idiographic view (Fagan, 1992). These investigations were happening parallel to the rise of public education becoming mandated, and so more and more children of different backgrounds and abilities were appearing in the schools. This focus on individual students as case studies for the whole would be largely lost by his successors, but the idea behind it remained, these psychologists wanted to know how to assess which students were falling behind and the potential causes so solutions could be created (D'Amato et al., 2011, Fagan, 1992).

A contemporary to Witmer who would also become largely influential in the field was G. Stanley Hall. He was the opposite of Witmer in some key places, namely that he was focused more on comparing children to a drafted norm of their age group, otherwise known as the nomothetic view. This is where the idea of School Psychology shifting to focus less on case studies, as Witmer did, comes from. He would go on to focus primarily on trying to draft a timeline of the normal child, and while sometimes discredited for his methods of studying children because of his reliance on surveys conducted by 'laypeople', he is recognized for his efforts being preliminary for the timeline of cognitive and educational child development today (Braden et al., 2001, Fagan, 1992). His idea of comparing the child to a norm would be the basis for thinkers like Binet and Simon who would go on to create the first IQ tests like those that are used today in education to identify children who are exemplary or endangered (Braden et al., 2001, D'Amato et al., 2011, Young, 2016).

While a percentage of these ideas have been replaced today with ones that have much more robust supporting evidence, such as the Behavior Assessment System for Children or the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children which are the most commonly used (Benson et al., 2019), they are still the history of how we conduct this research. These thinkers began the study of children in comparison to the norm, which would influence psychologists like child development theorists. In addition, they fundamentally shaped the way that we think about education in the United States for those who differ from the norm. They recognized that a child falling behind may not just be because they're cognitively impaired but instead a combination of factors like environment, genetics, or mental health. This guiding principle has shaped the methods of educators to identify high-risk children to try and prevent learning loss or to place them in appropriate assisted education. Modern-day instruments consist of tests for various psychological or environmental conditions, but the original idea of early School Psychology, pinpointing an issue that may not necessarily be solely educationally related and fixing that, is still there (Benson et al., 2019). Both sides, nomothetic and idiographic, view the need for the whole child to be investigated to find what causes the child to lag behind. From the beginning, Psychology has called for accounting for the child in all aspects, not just educational achievement. It has called for also the overall behavior of children to be assessed, which aligns well with the early US public education goals of fostering community.

I have neglected to mention a key factor in all of this, which is diversity. Diversity, in this context, specifically refers to diversity of race and ability. The growth of public education is inexplicably tied to politics and human rights debates, as the rise of common schools came right after the Civil War and throughout its history has faced many debates over content, religion, and who is allowed to access education. Two of the groups most excluded were African American

and disabled children. African American children were commonly excluded because of the Jim Crow laws and the rise of segregated schools and hence saw little access to the equal education thinkers like Mann championed. Even after the passing of *Brown v Education* in 1954, African American children still faced significant issues with accessing education (Amatullah et al., 2023, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Ornstein & Levine, 2007). Another group commonly left behind were disabled children, despite being focused on by thinkers like Hall or Whitmer. They received no legal protections until 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later changed and expanded upon in 2004 to become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (ED, 2024). The effects of these exclusions are still felt today, as will be discussed later, but it is important to pull out and note that there is an entire history not told by the general history of public education for those who were often excluded from it.

### **Education Criteria**

So education in the United States was created with the express purpose of ensuring that all children got equal access to a quality education and promoting educational success, or as Horace Mann said “Every child should be educated: if not educated by its own father, the State should appoint a father to it. I would much sooner surrender a portion of the territory of the Commonwealth to an ambitious and aggressive neighbor than I would surrender the minds of its children to the dominion of ignorance” (Mann, 1868). The way this has been conceptualized has changed over the years, as our understandings of both education and Psychology have expanded, but the core goal remains the same. So for my larger question of how education be conducted in a post-crisis moment, it seems like this should be the goal being achieved and accessed. The idea of children having equal opportunity and achieving educational success is the way to determine if education is succeeding, as this has been and continues to be the guiding mission the United

States has expressed for its education system in modern times. Operationalizing these two concepts of equal opportunity and educational success will ensure that I can accurately measure if the solutions I'm seeking out will achieve what I need them to.

I have decided to operationalize these into three separate criteria: Academic achievement, socioemotional development, and accessibility.

### **Academic Achievement**

Academic achievement was an easy choice as it's what most people would look to in order to check how well an education system is doing. This criterion fulfills a large portion of the goal set out for educational success because presumably if students are doing well academically, they're being educated successfully. The most common assessment done on academic achievement within research is standardized testing, where that data can be used to track students in terms of the whole age group and also compare them to age groups of years past (Crooks, 1988). Despite the commonality of its usage, there are some reservations in terms of the impacts this may have on students' long-term ability and motivation to learn (Crooks, 1988, Wiliam, 2011). Yet it remains the dominant choice to operationalize educational success for both researchers and school administrators alike. The reason for this is that standardized tests, like MAP Growth or the PSSA, were designed to be a set way to measure children's position in regard to the norm. It's the evolution of Hall's thought, seeing children in comparison to where they are "supposed to be".

The MAP Growth, for example, was made by NWEA(Northwest Evaluation Association) which is a nonprofit organization focused primarily on creating assessments for schools or parents to use. It was designed with the intended purpose of easily displaying where children are in regards to their understanding of topics like reading, math, or science compared to their peers



from that year's scores, their expected skills to have by grade level, and themselves in the past if they take the test multiple times. It's meant to be a tool to help guide the adults in these children's lives like teachers, parents, or administration on where students are and what support they may need as individuals or classes. The way this measure was decided, in regards to where students should be in each grade level, was through state standards set for education and programs like the Common Core (NWEA, 2023). These are set guidelines that have been determined to accurately describe where students should be at each point in their educational career in regard to their knowledge of academic content. If a student meets these standards, they are assumed to be achieving educational success and receiving quality education.

Where these guidelines exactly come from is difficult to track the specifics of, but state standards are made through the collaboration of school faculty, parents, and experts in education or cognitive development depending on the state. It most often seems to be the collaborative effort of educators across the state, including educators from across the state to be as representational of the whole state as possible (NYSED, 2017, SCED, 2023). The Common Core came from the collaboration of the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, the nonprofit organization Achieve, and the two largest teaching unions (Nelson, 2014).

A discussion of what the curriculum is or how valid it is exists outside the scope of this project however, so taking the various measures and standards set by the American education system as accurate assessments of education's ability to have students learn the content we deem as important to their educational success and access to quality education as Americans will be a necessary assumption.

## **Socioemotional Development**

The next component is Socioemotional Development, or how children learn to understand their own emotions and form meaningful relationships with others. This concept, while perhaps not the first to come to mind in terms of determining education success, has existed within American conceptualizations of quality education since the beginnings of public schools. Albeit under different names, there was an understanding of the necessity of schooling to promote community and children getting along with each other as far back as the Common School movement (Kober & Rentner, 2020). There is also the idea from Witmer or Hall that a child needs to be viewed not just academically but as a whole set of factors to accurately assess and treat any issues that come up within their schooling (Fagan, 1992). Finally, within recent decades, states have begun to add aspects of socioemotional development to their state standards for education. Pennsylvania, for example, dedicates an entire key learning area to Social and Emotional Development in their 2016 learning standards for kindergarteners, listing a number of skills that the state believes a child of that age should be learning or know how to use. They mention topics like managing emotions, building trust, and conflict management (PDE, 2016). The idea of education not just being to gain content mastery has always existed, Horace Mann and his beliefs on the social benefits of public school and the necessity of moral education in schools were the basis of the popularization of public schools, and hence it is necessary to include in my assessment of educational success and quality education.

The issue is however that socioemotional development is difficult to, and not commonly, tracked on larger scales. While there are various measures created for the purpose of larger scale application, they are often either difficult to administer on the whole due to training necessary or time constraints, or they are restricted to age group and do not tackle socioemotional

development in its entirety. Observation-based assessments are still regarded as the best method of gathering accurate data on the socioemotional development of children (Brownell et al., 2015, Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016). In practice, this leads to trained researchers needing to travel physically to school in order to administer the tests, which can take up a chunk of the child's day they could be learning. These tests are also often geared towards just specific age groups, so no one unified test can be universally delivered to rank all school-aged children on this measure unlike something like the MAP Growth for academic achievement (Benson et al., 2019).

However, large-scale observational data is unavailable on the level that could be applied nationally. There have been studies done on specific cities (OECD, 2021), but nothing on a national scale even by the Department of Education. The Department of Education has, however, released data on subjects like school crime, suspension rates, and disciplinary infractions on a national level (NCES, 2024). They also, within the peak years of the pandemic, began to record data on the perception of socio-emotional development by school administration, however, that is only recorded by survey questionnaires answered by administrators (NCES, 2022).

So how should socioemotional development be analyzed on this larger scale? There is one measure mentioned earlier and used by the ED: student behavior. Antisocial behaviors are, for children, defined as behaviors that violate the norm. This can be either internalizing, behaviors like isolation or withdrawal, or externalizing, behaviors like bullying or hitting (Calkins & Keane, 2009, Gaik et al., 2010, Pulkkinen, 2001). Many of these behaviors are also commonly called problem behaviors or delinquent behaviors within educational or developmental settings (Lulla et al., 2019). Data on information like disruptions, suspensions, arrests, and the like can be used in substitute of a large-scale study on socioemotional development in its absence. The justification for this is that studies on behavioral issues have

provided some evidence of a correlation to poor socioemotional development or socioemotional competence. Studies have been done to support the idea that socioemotional development training can decrease the prevalence of problem behaviors, most commonly in kindergarteners, but also in other age groups (Frey et al., 2005, Justicia-Arráez et al., 2021, Nix et al., 2013, Trentacosta & Fine, 2010). On the inverse, there have been a few studies that support the idea that children with behavioral issues have lower social competence or could benefit heavily from specific social coaching focusing on expanding their ability to use socioemotional tools (Hukkelberg et al., 2019, Kuperminc & Allen, 2001, Najmussaib & Mushtaq, 2023). Here we see a connection emerging between socioemotional competency, the measurement that socioemotional development is tracked by, and problem behaviors. This connection only grows when looking at the measures taken during a socioemotional observation study, and how many of them have sections specifically for problem behaviors as part of their analysis of socioemotional level (Benson et al., 2019, Cohn et al., 2009, Elliott & Gresham, 2013, Pearson, 2018). Finally, there is also the aspect that, since the common school era, the goal of socioemotional development in public schools has specifically been to promote community, and so any behaviors that would disrupt that community or put children into conflict would go against those goals (Kober & Rentner, 2020). There is also the idea that the type of socioemotional development that public schools focus on, as shown by the origins of public schools, is specifically focused on the building of community and getting along with peers. I do realize that, in focusing on behavioral issues, socioemotional issues like anxiety and depression will likely be left behind. However, as there appears to be no solid and wide-ranging data for that information specifically post-pandemic, I am forced to focus on the more behaviorally apparent socioemotional issues.

And so, in place of a more in-depth national socioemotional overview, as that doesn't exist, records for suspensions and school crime will be the operationalized variable to see changes in socioemotional development.

### **Accessibility**

A child can't learn if they are not given the adequate resources and support to do so. Accessibility, in the way that I'm defining it for the sake of this project, refers to the accessibility to a quality education that children receive. Two groups emerged when looking both into the history of education and the current day struggles to rehabilitate education as the two that were most impacted, and those were African American and disabled students. As mentioned in the history section, these two groups didn't receive legal protections until much later on, in 1954 and 1975 ( Amatullah et al., 2023, Kober & Rentner, 2020, Ornstein & Levine, 2007). These two also were the hardest hit by the pandemic, seeing the sharpest declines in test scores(Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023, NCES, 2022). Using these groups and their data from the other two criteria as a case study, I believe that I can see if education is truly accessible to all students or if it's tailored to only the more privileged among them. If African American and disabled students are falling noticeably behind in things like academic achievement or socioemotional development, especially since African American children are more likely to be overidentified as having behavioral issues and hence punished for it (Cokley et al., 2014, Morgan & Farkas, 2016), then this is a sign of a lack of accessibility and bias.

### **Operationalization of Criteria**

Those are the three factors, but how have I operationally defined them? What data and evidence will I use to either support or refute the claims of education failing and investigate exactly how it's failing? Academic achievement is operationalized as test scores or standardized

testing data from tests such as MAP Growth that have been released to the public or conducted to track the average achievement of American children. I will also be using a second data type of % of students behind or on track compared to past years, as this is an analysis that may prove helpful in comparing the pre and pandemic years. This is operationalized through school-reported data as well as some standardized testing offering this comparison.

Socioemotional development will be defined by the number of reported behavior issues like suspensions, as mentioned earlier. Data from teacher or school reports on behavior management or frequency will also be used. Finally, for accessibility, I will highlight the specific data from academic achievement and socioemotional development for African American and disabled children, to see if there is a significant difference between them and their peers.

### **Evidence of Crisis: Academic Achievement**

My central question is asking what to do about education post or amid crisis. So far, I have yet to present any significant supporting evidence that there is a large-scale crisis that has emerged from COVID specifically within the American education system. So, to demonstrate this crisis and its effects, I am going to focus on the years after the pandemic began and present the current state of the three criteria for educational success and quality education.

Academic achievement has noticeably fallen in the time after the beginning of the pandemic, which I will henceforth refer to as post-pandemic. I choose this for ease of terminology, and not as a statement of whether or not the pandemic has ended. Since the pandemic started, researchers wanted to ensure there was adequate data collected to see the impacts of things like remote learning on both short and long-term learning outcomes. One such study is the School Pulse Panel, conducted every few months, which tries to gather accurate data on the current state of education post-Covid. Even 2 years after the beginning of the pandemic in

April and December of 2022, we can see that there are a significant amount of students struggling. Public schools reported that 49% of their students were behind grade level in December of 2022. This is compared to the 36% before Covid. They also report that of all the schools surveyed, 99% of them said they had children behind in both math and reading (NCES 2022).

The Portland-based NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) found similarly dismal results in their research, specifically looking at the rate of growth for these students. Using the results from their own MAP® Growth™ reading and math assessments that around 20,000 public schools have taken, they analyzed to see the differences pre and post pandemic. There are two briefs that illuminate issues here: one on students who were in early elementary in 2021-2022 and one on late elementary and middle school students in 2022-2023.

The early elementary school study shows that first and second-grade students were noticeably negatively impacted by the pandemic in terms of learning loss from the pandemic, even though they experienced no switch from in-person learning to online. First graders showed a decrease in 6 percentile points in reading and a decrease by 3 in math in the 2021-22 school year when compared to the 2018-19 data, while second graders showed a decrease of 7 in reading and 8 in math. The report does say, however, that second-grade students are showing growth in their subjects that parallels or exceeds that of pre pandemic growth, a ratio of 0.99 for math and 1.01 for reading. The first-grade cohort shows both a loss of progress and also a lack of growth compared to pre pandemic numbers, with the ratios being 0.94 for math and 0.93 for reading (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022).

The second study shows something interestingly different, however. The youngest cohort from the study was originally in 3rd grade when they began to track their development and is

now in 5th. This group is the only one, of the 3rd to 8th-grade cohorts, not falling behind in any respect, and actually in some cases showing improvements. The exact reasoning for this isn't speculated, though the researchers do mention that generally younger students make larger growth per year than older students do on the exam (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023).

They found that the other post pandemic students in 2022-23 were behind pre pandemic students of their age group in 2016-19 by 1-19% in reading and 6-15% in math in the 2022-23 school year. The percentages represent the difference in percentages, given how large it is especially in reading, by age group. The 1% behind in reading is the second youngest cohort while the 6% in math is the 3rd oldest. Math seems more variable, with the groups starting to be tracked in 4th, 6th, and 8th doing the worst. While reading has a clearer track, with 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th showing a marked difference from the youngest cohorts.

The larger issue presented by this study in particular is how these numbers are worse than those of the 2021-22 school year, where the students were on par with their pre-pandemic counterparts (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023). The cause for concern here is that rather than students improving and maintaining their academic performance, it seems that a gap is appearing that isn't being recovered. This phenomenon is particularly present in the oldest age groups, 6-8th, in reading, where they were already the furthest below the pre-pandemic numbers (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022). Comparatively to what they found in their 2022 brief (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022), it appears that the rebound they found is not catching children up at the rate to close the achievement gap that has appeared between pre and post-pandemic test scores in all age groups and the growth gaps in certain age group.

The largest finding of this brief however is the calculated time to catch up. 4.1 months in reading and 4.5 months in math is the estimated additional schooling needed for the average



student to catch up to pre pandemic scores (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023). They calculated this using the difference in test scores pre and post pandemic and used pre pandemic monthly gains in test scores to calculate how long it would take to reach the level that children were before Covid.

So it appears overall that middle age groups are recovering, showing either on par or better than pre pandemic growth rates even if the test scores are still behind the pre pandemic average. However, children who started school online or students who had more years of in-person education, 1st graders and the 6-8th grade cohorts, appear to be both behind in test scores and also their ability to catch up to pre pandemic growth rates, meaning the achievement gap for them has only increased over the years.

### **Evidence of Crisis: Socioemotional Development**

Socioemotional Development, as I've operationalized it, also has seen a decline. The School Pulse Panel also did some surveying for this and found that more than 80% of the public schools surveyed saw stunted development in behavioral and socioemotional areas, attributed directly to the pandemic in May of 2022. Notably, when asked about the socioemotional development impact of COVID again in May 2022, 43% of public schools agreed that there was a negative impact on development by COVID and 44% strongly agreed. They also asked about specific behaviors and if their frequency was impacted. 48% of schools said that rowdiness in school was increased by COVID and 56% said that classroom disruptions were increased. These are behaviors that are impactful to both student learning and their relationships with their peers. In terms of potential fighting and bullying, 32% of schools said that physical altercations increased and 30% said that bullying was eased (NCES 2022). As noted before, the way the School Pulse Panel collected data was by sending surveys to school administrators for them to fill out a survey. All the data is survey-reported

### **Case Study on Socioemotional Development Crisis: North Carolina**

North Carolina, as a part of their consolidated report to the General Assembly, released data from the 2022-23 school year on school-related offenses. In 2022-23, compared to the pre pandemic year of 2018-19, there was a 20.8% increase in the number of unique individual students who received a short-term suspension. They did only see a 0.7% from 2018-19 to 2022-23 in number of suspensions per suspended student, but they also found that the average number of days increased by 12.6%. In simpler terms, the amount of students who received any amount of suspensions increased by 20.8%, the amount of suspensions per year each student who was suspended at any point had increased by 0.7%, and the number of days that suspension lasted was increased by 12.6%. The most common “unacceptable behaviors” for the suspensions were Defiant Behaviors or Assaults/Threats, which constituted 45.9% and 26.0% of single behavior short-term suspensions respectively. Middle school students were the most likely to be suspended with 107,199 suspensions, compared with 55,715 and 84,539 for elementary and high school students. Kindergarten students had the highest number of suspensions per student suspended at 2.15 suspensions (NC DPI, 2024). They did report data on long-term suspensions but made no comparison to past years so the data isn’t as relevant. Overall, there’s a marked change seen in the amount of behavior issues appearing in schools compared to pre pandemic years, showing likely stunting of socioemotional growth, or at least competence as that’s most closely linked with behavioral issues, within the children.

### **Evidence of Crisis: Accessibility**

The two main data sources I used for academic achievement, the MAP Growth briefs, and socioemotional development, the North Carolina brief, specifically dedicate sections to African American children. The MAP Growth did not specify disabled students' data, however,

there was data released by the National Center for Educational Statistics specifically for 9-year old children with disabilities between 2020 and 2022 (NCES, 2022). They administered a test called the NAEP, which is similar to the MAP Growth. So in place of the MAP Growth data for disabled students, the NCES data will be used.

In the first of the MAP Growth briefs, about early elementary school students, African American first and second-grade students saw a decrease in reading of 8 and 11 percentile ranks compared to white students decrease of 4 and 5 percentile rankings. In math, the African American students saw a decrease of 6 and 12 percentile rankings, to white childrens 1 and 6 percentile rankings (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2022). This is also already in comparison to the fact that this is decreased from pre pandemic numbers, where African American students were already behind the average of white students, so now they are even further behind than they already were thanks to various academic inequalities.

The second MAP Growth brief shows a similar trend. Black elementary school students saw a 15% decrease in average achievement levels for reading compared to the pre pandemic numbers, and black middle school students saw a 13% decrease. White elementary school students saw only an 11% decrease and white middle schoolers saw a 13% decrease. This is again, however, not taking into consideration that the starting national average for black students is below the overall average. In math there again is a similar trend, with black elementary schoolers seeing a 25% decrease and black middle school students seeing a 23% decrease. White elementary schoolers saw a 17% decrease while white middle schoolers saw a 20% decrease (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023).

For disabled students' numbers, the NCES compares them to those of non-disabled students as a benchmark. Compared to 2020, disabled students scale scores on the NAEP test

significantly dropped by 7 in reading and 8 in math. Nondisabled students scores significantly dropped 5 in reading and 7 in math, however similarly to the issue brought up in the MAP Growth data, the disabled students starting scores are lower than that of nondisabled students. Disabled students starting scores in 2020 were 187 in reading and 215 in math while nondisabled students started with 225 in reading and 245 in math (NCES, 2022).

As to the socioemotional side of the data, we again see the same trend. For African American students, they were the most likely students to get a short term suspension in the 2022-2023 school year at 335.59 suspensions per 1,000 students enrolled. While they were not among the groups that saw the highest rise in suspensions between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, all groups saw an increase in the number of suspensions, and African American students were again already disproportionately affected. Disabled students were the third most likely group of students to receive a short-term suspension, at 284.22 suspensions per 1,000 students enrolled. Disabled students were 2.1 times more likely to get suspended than nondisabled students. The change between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 is again not as large as other groups, however, it was still present with 2021-2022 having 24.1% of overall suspension being given to disabled students and 2022-2023 having 24.6%. Nonetheless, we see these two groups again falling significantly behind their peers in both academic achievement and socioemotional competence and development, showing an unequal access to quality education for both African American students and disabled students. There continues to be an issue of diversity within the institution of United States public education that has yet to be satisfactorily addressed.

### **Educational Psychology**

So now I have demonstrated the supporting evidence to my claim that there is a crisis within academics following the COVID crisis itself. Students aren't recovering as fast as we'd

hope, they seem to still be struggling to adjust to in person learning and being around others, and our most vulnerable students are even further behind their peers. What now? I have stated my goal is to look through the field of psychology in hopes of finding an actionable solution to the issue that I see in education. Luckily for me, there is a field of psychological study dedicated to this idea of applying psychological principals to the study of education on a whole, Educational Psychology.

Educational Psychology is the field of study dedicated to trying and using Psychology to inform how we approach and think about education as a system, in terms of research and theory. This differs from the earlier discussed School Psychology in that where School Psychology is very concerned with the individual child, on a micro level, Educational Psychology is more concerned with the larger system or the macro level of education that Psychology could improve. Where School Psychologists work to improve the life of the student and allow them to maximize their own learning, Educational Psychologists commonly study the larger scale systems like curriculum or educational methods to see what works best and is best supported by modern psychological research.

One such theory on educational methods that I found was the idea of Learning Theories. Learning Theories is the comprehensive name for the collection of some of the biggest theories that exist on how we think people learn. These are different from learning styles, like visual or kinesthetic learning, which is the idea that every student can be sorted into a group based on what their 'style' is (Chick, 2010). Instead, the idea behind learning theories is that they are the application of different schools of thinking in psychology to the classroom, specifically in terms of how theorists believe people learn and what education should focus on achieving. There is, depending on your source, anywhere from 3 to 28 different learning theories (Bates, 2016,

Culatta, 2024, Ertmer & Newby, 1993, Schunk, 2011). For this paper, I will focus on the three main theories that appear everywhere from adult learning to instructional design: Behaviorism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism.

These are also not mutually exclusive ideas, in fact, many teachers find that they like to mix them to produce better results on different issues (NU, 2022). However, for the sake of this paper, I want to see if one of these theories jumps out at me as a potential one to use not necessarily as the only answer but rather as the theoretical and philosophical scaffolding for changes that could be made to schooling on either a large or small scale. As such, I will go through each one and discuss its core idea, core founders, and the theories or disciplines within Psychology that it is supported or informed by. I will then see how well it addresses each of the three core factors for educational success and see if any manage to cover all of them in a way that may produce actionable change.

## **Behaviorism**

Behaviorism is the learning theory that arose out of the discipline of psychology with the same name, Behavioral Psychology. It is focused, primarily, on the idea that learning is done through a behavioral change that can be induced by the external environment. Behavioral Psychology holds the belief that the internal mechanisms of the brain cannot be studied and so it is necessary to instead observe and record behavior alone (Andrade & Walker, 2019, OpenStax, 2020, Stangor & Walinga, 2014). This is classic psychology, the ideas of conditioning and reinforcements. These ideas came from primarily four men: Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike, John Broadus Watson, and B.F. Skinner. The learning theory that emerges from these is mostly concerned with just two: Pavlov and Skinner, for one specific reason: They were the giants of conditioning.

There are two main types of conditioning, classical and operant conditioning. Pavlov is known for classical conditioning which is the idea that humans make associations to stimuli that are not naturally occurring but instead result from multiple exposures to the stimuli with a response to something else. Pavlov was a physiologist, not a psychologist, in training. He was interested in the cardiovascular system and the digestive system. It was his interest in the digestive system, and experiments on it, that led him to his huge discovery within the field of Psychology. Pavlov was using dogs to study the digestive system, but during that experiment, he began to notice that the dogs would salivate whenever they heard the bell that signaled mealtime. He further experimented and realized he had stumbled upon a new theory and idea of how the brain works, that unassociated stimuli and responses can be linked together. There is no biological reason the bell should make the dogs salivate, but they do because they learned to associate it with mealtime. Repeated exposures lead to associations, which is what is known now as classical conditioning. Pavlov also discovered that if the association was tested, by removing the factor that led to the stimuli and response being associated such as the food in the dogs' example, then the association would go away. This is known as extinction. However, it can come back spontaneously if the stimuli are presented at a later time again, although to a lesser degree, and also the association can be relearned even faster than the first time any subsequent time after that. He also discovered that stimuli that are similar can also elicit the response, which we now call generalization. Despite Pavlov being a teacher himself, he didn't use this discovery of conditioning and apply it to education. Instead, that would be done by his successors. (Babkin, 1949, OpenStax, 2020, Stangor & Walinga, 2014).

None are more notorious for this than B.F. Skinner, who helped expand and popularize the theory into what is known as operant conditioning, which is the version of conditioning that

is used as the basis for behaviorism as a learning theory (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, Smith, 1999). Thorndike was the first to study operant conditioning, however, Skinner took his experiments further and synthesized them into the models that are used today so he will be focused on. Operant conditioning is the theory that you can either add or take away a stimulus, positive or negative, and that can either reduce or strengthen the behavior, punishment or reinforcement (Andrade & Walker, 2019, Stangor & Walinga, 2014, Votaw, 2020). For how this applies in the classroom, Skinner himself wrote a book on teaching, known as *Technology of Teaching*, which directly takes his ideas of how humans learn and are affected by their environment and applies them to the profession of teaching. Skinner was a firm believer in testing, but more importantly than that, he was an advocate for machine learning, where students would be able to receive immediate feedback on their work. Skinner believed that the immediacy of feedback was necessary for proper reinforcement or reduction of the behavior to occur. He was also a firm believer that grades or getting questions wrong or right were adequate stimuli to achieve learning (Skinner, 1968).

So what does this look like today in modern educational practice? This typically looks like making learning goals that are clearly set out and defined, regular assessments with clear feedback, creating an environment that allows for proper association building, and sequencing the material so students don't learn the next portion until they understand the first. Because behaviorism is so concerned with the student's responses, it uses only behavioral outcomes to determine success, rather than trying to see if the child understands the concept. Behavioral outcomes referring to seeing if a student is able to practice a skill, but not seeing if they actually understand why that skill works. Procedural understanding, as it's sometimes called in educational research, is an important part of learning. However, it is not the only type and



conceptual understanding is also needed for children to be able to learn and use the skills taught to them in schools. There is a large wealth of literature within math education that deeply stresses the importance of not favoring one over the other, as both seem to be important to grasp the whole of what is being asked (Burns et al., 2015, Byrnes & Wasik, 1991, Canobi et al., 1998, Greeno et al., 1984, Mayer et al., 1975, Schneider & Stern, 2010). Behaviorism calls for teachers to determine a set of behaviors that they view as students achieving mastery of the material and create repeatable and reliable measures to achieve those behaviors. In terms of instructional practice, this is done through lectures, practice questions, repeated activities, and testing. And teachers give rewards and punishments that feel real and worthwhile to the children, albeit less punishments and more rewards works best if possible according to Skinner (McDonald & West, 2021, McLeod, 2003, West, 2017).

This system feels not all too different from how the US education system runs today. One of the largest things kids are told they need to worry about if they want to go to college is the SAT's, where they're graded on a set scale that is supposed to say whether they're more or less likely to succeed in college (Woidyla, 2021). Behaviorism fits well in being able to do large-scale curriculum planning across the nation or multiple schools. It is easier and simpler to implement because there are set guidelines, and teachers can easily understand what they are being asked to do, whether or not that's an easy change. Skinner did strongly advocate for the personalization of education, but specifically in terms of seeing learning as a step-by-step learning of specific behaviors and skills that children would be at different levels of and hence need to be brought to the next level to keep up with their peers. Behaviorists didn't say that they didn't care if the child learned, as someone who has a more cognitive understanding of teaching might think, but rather, that they thought the change in behavior was learning. And because

behaviorists think that behavior is the only thing that can really be observed, and internal processes can't be accessed to be evaluated, a change in behavior is learning to them (McDonald & West, 2021, McLeod, 2003, Smith, 1999a, West, 2017).

There are criticisms of the Behaviorist learning theory, which are parallel to those of the current US public education system in some ways. The largest one is whether or not assessments like tests, which behaviorist learning theory is prone to use, actually assess the child properly and if it truly helps the child and their adults understand where to go next. There is research to suggest that repeated testing can help with longer-term retention of information (Butler & Roediger III, 2007, Butler, 2010, Leeming, 2002), however research suggests that may be because it is a practice of retrieval and not just repeated behavioral reinforcement (Lyle & Crawford, 2011, Karpicke & Blunt, 2011, Smith & Karpicke, 2014), making it more cognitivist than behaviorist in nature. The retention isn't because of the conditioning of the skills through the positive or negative reinforcement of the test, but instead because of the test requiring the person to recall that information and that act of recall helps people retain that information better. There is evidence however that feedback, not necessarily testing, can improve retention and performance (Butler et al., 2008, Butler & Roediger, 2008).

However, this is missing the largest elephant in the room which is that, in practice, behaviorist methods have shaped into becoming standardized testing. Standardized testing, as mentioned previously about the SAT, is meant to see where students are in comparison to set parameters or other children on the application and behavior of different skills. Because it has such a regimented and only one right answer way of looking at success, it is focused less on testing actual understanding and more on if a child is able to answer the questions right. Again, as mentioned earlier, children can use skills while not understanding them. It fuels a learning by

the test mentality, rather than a learning for the sake of learning mentality. Children who understand or manifest knowledge differently fall through the cracks of the SAT because it's so regimented.

The issue with this is that there have been a large amount of studies done that show that standardized testing is fundamentally harmful to students. Issues of comparison which demotivate children (Marsh et al., 2016, Trautwein et al., 2009), the pressure the tests put on teachers and students (Moon et al., 2007, Nichols et al., 2007), testing making students care more about test scores than learning (Kim, 2021, Snyder, 1971), and how underprivileged students often fall behind in test scores thanks to both educational and economical inequalities (Lomax et al., 1995, Moon et al., 2007). There is a case to be made that behaviorist ideas have been twisted into this by the effects of the modern educational system, but as said earlier, most of the positive effects behaviorism brings to the table can be attributed to cognitive processes, and the act of focusing on just behavior instead of the whole cognitive process can be reductive and lead to issues like standardized testing. While cognitive processes can be accessed through testing, that's not the focus when the actual data coming out of standardized testing is just whether or not the behaviors that have been decided to show competence have been met or not. There's no degree of gradation, it's a yes or no question, which does not accurately assess a child's full understanding of what they learned. Behaviorism works as a method of teaching, but not on its own, as it misses fundamental parts of the development of the child. It's great for procedural learning but not conceptual.

### **Cognitivism**

Cognitivism is the learning theory that was generated from the field of psychology known as cognitive psychology. Cognitive Psychology was created in response to the behaviorist

movement, and focuses on the internal processes that a person goes through rather than just their behavior (Cummings & Sanders, 2021, Pilegard, 2024). There are many different avenues within cognitive psychology, but it is more developmental or instructional cognitive psychology from which the learning theory cognitivism comes. Cognitive psychology spans a wide range of topics from information processing, to the types of memory, to sensory processing. So while cognitivism arose partially from all of these ideas, and involves them as scaffolding, it came from two main places, or rather thinkers: Piaget and Gange.

Jean Piaget was the foundational theorist for cognitive development, as he proposed his theory of staged development which is still used as a basis today and taught in every child development class. He believes that children learn in stages, learn when they are active agents, and have an internal structure that corresponds to the outside world. Stage theorists think that children develop through clear and defined steps, where there may be continual growth of knowledge, but the large conceptual understandings happen in stages. While the stages are what he was most famous for, in the learning theory his conceptualizations of how children experienced the world is much more salient. Piaget believed that children gain knowledge not through instruction but through incorporating their experiences of the world into their own personal understandings within their heads. While adults may introduce those ideas, or guide the children to experiences where they can learn, it is the children themselves and themselves alone who turn those experiences into knowledge. Instruction itself does not generate knowledge, instruction is an experience that children use to create understandings. These understandings are called schemas and are the cognitive structures of a person's understanding and ideas about a certain topic. Children have schemas of how the world works and check and adjust their schema based on new information from the world. True learning, that is knowledge acquisition and not

just habit or behavioral memorization, required some amount of conflict either internally or externally for Piaget. There must be a reason the children investigate an issue, and that is because it does not line up with their current mental understanding. There were two main processes involved in this: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is what children do when first presented with a new idea, which is adding it to their schema. Accommodation is the process of changing and shifting schema based on new information or repeated trials that help the child gain more information. Piaget believed that children would be presented with a conflict or question and then would investigate it through experience and testing until they had gained enough information to assimilate it into their schema and accommodate it (Beilin & Fireman, 1999, Isaacs & Lawrence, 1973, Pankin, 2013, Schunk, 2011).

After Piaget, Robert M. Gagne is the next important thinker for cognitivism. Gagne took a lot of the ideas for learning, memory, and development developing in cognitive psychology and formed them into conditions of learning. He identified five different types of learning outcomes: intellectual skills, verbal information, cognitive strategies, motor skills, and attitudes. Intellectual skills are rules, concepts, and procedures. For example, how to solve a derivative. Verbal information is also called declarative knowledge, it's facts and memorized information. Gagne actually quantified schema as verbal information. Cognitive strategies have to do with memory, so repetition, recall, and problem solving using past knowledge. Motor skills are what they say, gradually learning how to make smooth and steady movements. Finally, attitudes are similar to moral characteristics, beliefs people hold that influence their behavior. Gagne said that there were two types of conditions that need to exist for someone to learn: internal and external. Internal refers to the student's current state of schemas, so what they already possess in their

memory to use, while external refers to the cues students are given to recall that knowledge so they are able to add the new ideas into their schemas.

Gagne then finishes the conditions with his phases of learning: Preparation for learning, acquisition and performance, and transfer of learning. These three are then further broken up into nine different phases that each correspond to the instructional guidance that Gange provided. Those nine are attending, expectancy, retrieval, selective perception, semantic encoding, retrieval and responding, reinforcement, cueing retrieval, and generalizability. The three larger phases boil down to preparation priming the students by calling their attention and setting up the external conditions needed to have students retrieve the schemas they need to add onto. Acquisition is when students add the information to their internal understanding, created from past experiences learning and interacting with the world, and reinforce them through retrieval and assessments. Transfer of learning refers to how skills learned in one place can be used and hence reinforced by applying them in other places, it is the using of skills in a context different from where it was learned. Gange's theory was born partially from Piaget's, through the understanding of learning being an internal process that children go through under the guidance and environment set up by the teacher. However, cognitivism at its core relies most heavily on Gange since he has a much more robust and easily applicable theory for instructional design in a classroom setting.

Cognitivism, as a learning theory, is the idea that the teacher is there not to teach necessarily but instead to structure and prepare the material in a way that allows the students to experience it as active agents. It relies heavily on the ideas of Piaget, who says children must learn by doing so they can add it to their internal understanding of the world, and Gange, who emphasizes the teacher making the content organized in a way that translates easily into the the brain's schemas. Most commonly, teachers will use the Bloom Taxonomy. The Bloom Taxonomy

is a hierarchical model for educational outcomes, where teachers identify the level of learning needed for the subject and create activities based on that level. The modern version, as it has been updated many times now over the years, is *remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create*. The lowest level is *remember* because it just requires the student to recall and activate their schemas for a subject while *create* is the highest because it requires a level of synthesis of new material from past schemas and new information and is a more cognitively intensive level of learning (Armstrong, 2010, Bloom, 1956, McDonald & West, 2021). The instructional design of cognitivism could include activities like asking questions before a lecture to make students remember past knowledge so they can add to it, lecturing on the subject to present new knowledge, or having students write essays to demonstrate understanding or analysis. This is different from behaviorism in the understanding of what knowledge is. Teachers are not asking students to demonstrate behaviors or skills when they make students recall past knowledge, they are trying to access the conceptual idea of the knowledge. The questions would be more analytical and conceptual based. And essays are emphasized because of how they can show not just procedural understanding but conceptual understanding. The way reinforcement is given in cognitivism isn't through rewards but rather relying on the natural curiosity of children and having knowledge be the driving factor (McDonald & West, 2021, Smith, 1999b, West, 2017).

In terms of weaknesses, cognitivism is limited by its origins of focusing solely on the internal structures of the brain with little behavioral or contextual elements being given weight. Because it relies so heavily on the idea of a general greater human way of processing information, its most common criticism is that it does not account for cultural differences within its theories and understandings of how the brain works. In assuming that all people's brains

develop similarly in terms of how they conceptualize ideas, a lack of reproducibility and inherent racial and cultural bias appears since much of cognitive research is done on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples (de Oliveira & Nisbett, 2017, Dotson & Duarte, 2020, Gutchess & Rajaram, 2023, Thomas et al., 2023, Qu et al., 2021, Wang, 2016). There is a lack of room for the differences between cultures in how people approach forming connections between ideas. There has also been the counter argument from behavioral psychology which argues that there is a gap presented in cognitive psychology since it can't be observed directly and doesn't always account for individual differences in interacting with the world which behavioral psychology accounts for better (Chase & Watson, 2004, Logie, 2018, Overskeid, 2008). It, in focusing so much on the brain as a whole concept and a larger process, loses a lot of the individual difference that makes psychological research so difficult to conduct.

### **Constructivism**

Constructivism, like cognitivism, comes from cognitive psychology. As many things are in Psychology, constructivism is the result of people looking at some ideas from cognitivism, and asking if it was going far enough. Some ideas from Piaget are used in constructivism, as he is a remarkably influential individual from cognitive psychology, but the primary thinkers for constructivism as a learning theory are different. In regards to what Piaget calls to be done in practice, he is more constructivist in his ideas, but the way his ideas have traditionally been applied to instructional design follow cognitivism more than constructivism. So instead, the larger thinkers for constructivism end up building on and in conversation with aspects of Piaget, those thinkers being Vygotsky, Bruner, and Dewey.

As an overview, constructivism is an offshoot of cognitivism that believes that learning is much more social and necessitates cultural and peer context to be involved for learning to occur



most effectively. It relies similarly on the structure of schemas and past knowledge as the basis of how the brain functions, but folds in more context and implications for the social aspects of learning.

Vygotsky was a contemporary of Piaget, who is often taught alongside him. He is best known for his theory of the zone of proximal development, which is the idea that humans can learn different things based on the level of help they receive. If a child is learning something by themselves, they can only get so far. If the child has an adult to help them, or a skilled instructor, they can reach much further levels of development than would be available to them if they were just on their own. Much of Vygotsky's thinking revolves around the social aspect of development. Vygotsky saw the environment as playing an integral part in the development of the child, and that you cannot remove a child from their context to study them. He had a lot of theories about what children did and how they grew, but the main thing that constructivism takes from him is the importance of social context, especially with language. Vygotsky saw language as something that we learn socially, building upon itself as we get older and interact with others, and saw it as a case study for how we learn generally. That it is our environment and experiences that teach us, not in isolation, but within the rich culture and differences around us (Daniels et al., 2007, Merriam & Bierema, 2013, Miller, 2011).

Dewey shapes this idea further for constructivism in terms of its direct application to education. Dewey was an American philosopher and educational reformer who was also very concerned with the social context of education. Dewey saw education, specifically in the US, as a functioning piece of the greater democratic machine of the American social experience. As such, it needed to both prepare students to be citizens, but more importantly for constructivism, learn with peers democratically with the teacher as the guide who has mastered the content. He

said that students come in already with their own prior knowledge of the world and its functions, and for school to be interesting and work properly, it must also reflect the greater world at large so children see merit in learning. He saw learning as a process of questioning and testing, not unlike Piaget, against prior knowledge and the social world at large but with the teacher as a cultural guide, like Vygotsky. He saw learning as something that happens as you live and do things, very experiential. He also was a firm believer that education needed to allow for intellectual freedom and for children to pursue their gifts in life, since not everyone is the same, and it needed to be concerned not just with academics but teaching the child how to be a member of society and improve their lives overall (Cahn, 1980, Merriam & Bierema, 2013, Višnovský & Zolcer, 2016, Waks, 2017).

The final thinker that shapes constructivism is Jerome Bruner, an American cognitive and educational psychologist who was interested in a lot of the same fields that Vygotsky was interested in, that is, society and how that changes the way children learn. Bruner was a firm believer in the child as an active agent of their own learning. He thought that children learned via imitation, and teachers would model and demonstrate skills and children would copy it. He also thought they could learn from the beginning given rules and principles and would be able to then apply to other places, and should be encouraged to. For constructivism, one of the biggest theories he had was that students should and learn best through collaboration and dialogue with others, that they construct, shape, and share knowledge with others through interactions. Students make meaning from experience, particularly through collaborative experiences. Learning is inherently social and culturally influenced. He also believed that, besides being a guide, the other large role a teacher should follow is being there to help children understand their place within society, how society and themselves may hold different views, and how to balance these two

ideas. He also gave guidance on instructional design, saying that children should be taught through actions, icons, and symbols depending on age so they can adapt and learn by their level of skill and understanding. If the instruction is properly conducted and takes into account the current skill level and prior knowledge of the student, a teacher could teach anything and keep teaching and building on the past knowledge according to Bruner (Breckenridge, 2023, Greenfield, 2016, Smidt, 2011).

In terms of instructional design and practice, thanks to the emphasis from all three thinkers, there is much more peer-to-peer learning. Projects, experiments, and group discussions are frequently used in constructivist instructional designs. Creating activities where concepts are demonstrated, or students can hands on learn something together is also common. Reciprocal teaching, or teaching where the students act as the teacher for other students to build mastery, is also common. Problem-solving and applying skills from past lessons to current situations are emphasized. Constructivism is more commonly used within places like apprenticeships or skill based careers like law or medicine or architecture where typically a master is guiding a student along but it's still the student doing the learning and being hands-on. It's a bit more open-ended than the other two because of its heavy dependence on context, but often just stresses the need for the students to be active and engage with the material and each other (McDonald & West, 2021, McLeod, 2003, Schunk, 2011, West, 2017).

Constructivism, in terms of its application to classrooms, is a bit hard to quantify because it calls for a rethinking of how to approach education. Because of its social nature and how it considers taking every single learner into account, not just what they know from before and where they need to go but also the way they approach and construct meaning, it seems difficult to implement. However, there are a number of ways that have been outlined to implement into

the modern classroom environment by various educational thinkers in the last 30 years. One of the popular is group work, not just projects, but also discussions and experiments. This can also include peer-to-peer tutoring. Experiments are sometimes involved in something known as discovery learning, a way of learning that Bruner was a large contributor to. Discovery learning entails the teacher presenting a problem or question, and instead of going through it directly, allows students to engage with it first and ask questions and receive feedback to guide them to a proper understanding of the issue. This is, for a practical example, sometimes done by presenting students with a primary source and letting them explore it and pull out the lessons for the day. There is also a strong focus on reflective work, allowing students time to reflect on their process and how they created their understanding, a process known as metacognition in cognitive psychology. It is the act of reflecting on your own thought processes, and constructivism uses it often in its process of pre and post-activity reflections (Gunstone, 1992, Tanner, 2012). Overall, constructivism calls for the classroom to become less of a teacher's authority space and more of an educational playground or thinking ground for students to be guided and helped to construct their own understandings of the topics listed to be taught (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, McDonald & West, 2021, West, 2017).

The largest complaint against constructivism is that it, as mentioned earlier, has an almost radical take on the student as an individual learner and the way to approach learning, so it struggles to be implemented satisfactorily. Constructivism has multiple different versions, I have outlined here a generalization of the most popular form of constructivism, but it is a large theory that is at times compared to a church with multiple denominations (Liu & Matthews, 2005). In terms of the general idea, however, there are still common critiques when it comes to the actual implementation of constructivism in the classroom. Often this is because of issues of teacher

training, the emphasis on standardized testing in modern education, and the sheer change in how classes would be run. Discovery learning is often called out for potentially presenting issues with teacher training and inconsistent feedback that leads to misunderstandings specifically for the field of science (Dimock & Boethel, 1999, Klahr & Nigam, 2004, McLeod, 2003, Schunk, 2011).

These are undoubtedly large issues, but this is the point where I want to call back to the thesis of this paper finally. Through my research, I have found constructivism to be the most satisfying answer from Psychology to the current issue of post-pandemic education. This is because, despite its rather radical stance, there are ways to implement ideas from it that have evidence of being effective in this specific crisis. To clarify, I am not calling for a complete overhaul of the current education system. At this point in the crisis, we are beginning to see cuts or major shifts to funding for both national and major city education departments (Arundel, 2024, Zimmerman, 2024), and this means less funding for sweeping reforms. To be realistic, major changes would not be smart to try and implement at this moment when the crisis is current and not in the future. So instead, I want to look at the small changes that happened during and post-pandemic that impacted students and show how many of them came from constructivist ideas.

The first, and largest, is the mass implementation of tutoring programs. In terms of tutoring, there is one type that have been seen to be effective across the board: High Dose Tutoring(HDT) (Gamoran & Murnane, 2023, Hashim et al., 2024). It involves having a qualified and trained instructor leading either a one-to-one or a small group tutoring session with focus on what each individual student needs. While some call for a more direct instruction type, which is contrary to constructivism, there is a huge emphasis on meeting the students where they are and

maintaining a relationship that goes beyond just instructor and student. This idea of fostering a mentorship relationship is specifically called out for at-risk populations, like African American children or disabled children, as being a necessary and deeply helpful measure. HDT has evidence to support it improving learning outcomes as a whole and helping children catch up to grade level when they have missed classes. The idea of tailoring to each student's needs, not just educationally but as a whole person, is a constructivist concept more than it is behaviorist or cognitivist. There is attention called out to the social aspects that show great improvements, and that's a large propelling idea for constructivism (Gamoran & Murnane, 2023, Hashim et al., 2024).

There was also the implementation of more peer-to-peer learning, which is pure constructivism at work. There has been evidence to show peer-to-peer learning works in online settings both in terms of classroom discussions or tutoring (Kim et al., 2021, Mafugu, 2021), and there is long-standing evidence that peers impact how students engage and behave in the classroom which became increasingly relevant both in the online and now in-person classroom setting (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015, Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018, Wang et al., 2015). Socioemotional learning and prosocial behaviors are called out as factors that influence this, and peer learning helps boost these things which in turn helps boost academic achievement and educational achievement overall. There is also supporting evidence that at-risk students are more vulnerable to peer influences and may benefit well from peer learning, and hence improving that area would aid them well (Greenwood, 1991, Hofmann & Müller, 2021).

These are just two simple and available changes that schools can implement to help boost student learning and student's socioemotional health, which also have evidence for specifically being able to assist the students most at risk. They come from constructivist ideas, the idea that

students should be approached as individuals and that peer learning is both effective and potentially has benefits outside of just academic outcomes. There are likely thousands of ways to approach the issue of post-pandemic education, and the research is very much still being done. But as a preliminary and easier-to-implement strategy, trying to pull from constructivism as a larger scale theory seems to be a viable option based on evidence, at least until further meta-analysis and research can be conducted.

**Chapter 2: The Christian Education Crisis of Late Antiquity: An Investigation of the  
Critics of St Augustine of Hippo**

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## Introduction

The previous chapter's review of three central theories of learning pointed to Constructivism as offering the most promising tools for rehabilitating post-pandemic education in the United States. At the heart of Constructivism is the idea that education should foster students in building their own worldviews, and that to accomplish this goal, students should have access to peer-to-peer discussions and tutoring, experiential learning, and teachers who act as guides or mentors rather than ultimate authorities. In my reading, the evidence gives strong indications of the efficacy of these methods in bringing about academic success, socioemotional development, and accessibility. Constructivist methods also have the important advantage of being relatively simple to implement—easier than an overhaul of curricula—while still maximizing educational success.

Yet one major goal of this interdisciplinary project is to go beyond the scope of traditional, modern psychological and educational scholarship in order to develop a more holistic sense of the problem of crisis in education and to search for solutions where others haven't. To this end, I move in this chapter to an exploration of another set of educational crises, and a figure who grappled with the problem of educational reform, in a strangely familiar time in human history. Here I'm talking about St. Augustine, famous Latin author of the late-fourth and early-fifth century, who wrestled with how to reimagine Roman education in an increasingly Christian, and decreasingly Roman, world. In studies of late antique educational culture, Augustine often features as one of our very best sources for both the structures of Roman education in the period and for the common qualms that Christians had with this decidedly non-Christian system.

In what follows, I retrace what Augustine himself says about education and also examine how past critics have differently framed and depicted Augustine's ideas of education. While Augustine has appeared robustly in these discussions of the evolution of Roman education, only recently has he been taken seriously as a reformer of that system, and still major gaps in these scholarly treatments remain. This chapter aims specifically to expose some holes in our investigations of Augustine as an educator, and to suggest some ways of filling them. Above all, I argue, Augustine awaits readers who have a real sense of modern educational theory to interpret and bring out the relevance of his ideas to the modern day. This will go, I hope, toward developing that more "holistic" idea of what it means—and has meant in the past—to rehabilitate educational systems after a crisis.

### **Augustine Biography**

Augustine<sup>1</sup> was born in Thagaste, a city in Roman North Africa in 354 AD, to his father Patricius and his mother Monica, who was a devout Christian. Given their wealth, or rather lack thereof, under most circumstances Augustine would not have been able to attend schooling. However, his father believed it to be important and saved up the funds, and made connections to wealthy patrons, in order to afford his son an education. Augustine would learn at Thagaste, continue in Carthage, and finish his studies in Rome. This education started with a grammarian, who taught the beginnings of language or unsurprisingly grammar, and then continued onto the study of rhetoric and reading of ancient literature. It was at Carthage, where he would first stumble upon Manichaeism and start his spiritual journey. He would heavily criticize this religion later on in his life, as their teachings of good and evil being both necessary and a natural part of life allowed for the responsibility of sin to be removed from the individual. It was at

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<sup>1</sup> Story of Augustine's life has been adapted from both what I've read/is common knowledge and specifics were pulled from from Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* and *Latin Literature: A History* by Conte

Carthage that Augustine would have his one and only son, who he wrote one work with the *De Magistro* (On the Teacher), which I will analyze in Chapter 3. His son died young, around a year after *De Magistro*, and a few years after Augustine's baptism.

The education allowed Augustine access to the Roman elite, as an educated man was a well-respected member of society and capable of attaining positions that could lead in turn to increases of wealth and status. His educational success led to an important recommendation for a "professorship" of rhetoric in Milan, a very highborn profession, where he taught for some years. It was during this time that he encountered Saint Ambrose, a Catholic bishop in Milan, who along with other members of the Neo-Platonist circles in Milan would lead Augustine to his eventual Christian conversion and baptism. After converting, Augustine decided to move back to Africa and soon became a priest in Hippo, a city not too far from his hometown. As the story goes, he was so beloved as a priest and thinker that he was promoted to bishop just a year later, where he stayed and dedicated himself for the rest of his life.

But what makes me say that he was born in a similar educational crisis that could be equated to the likes of what we are experiencing with COVID-19 and its impacts? Augustine sat in a very uncomfortable period in time, at the precipice of the fall of the Western Empire and also amid the rapid rise of Christianity through Roman society. Augustine lived in the years 354 to 430 AD. During his life, there was mass political strife and massive cultural change, all of which culminated in the "official" fall of Rome, in 476 AD. But, as many scholars have discussed, the fall of the Roman Empire was more of a gradual change as the Empire fell out of control and was attacked by the Vandals and Visigoths, who came from the area that is now Germany, several times before they officially fell. He was also born during the age when Christianity was becoming the predominant religion, in the decades following Emperor Constantine's conversion

in 312 AD. Augustine was put right into the middle of this, where the traditional structures and ideals of the Empire were still influential but quickly losing relevance and the newer Christian culture was still being formed and established. This allowed Augustine to assume a unique position in history as one of the founding fathers of Catholic culture and thinking for centuries to come, whose influence extends even to the modern day.

### **Roman Education: A Quick Guide by Augustine**

So what did Roman education even look like? Augustine is, funnily enough, a very prominent source for this information. This is because of his accounts of his childhood rearing and schoolroom experiences in his most popular book, *Confessiones* (The Confessions), in which he wrote about his conversion in 386 and his life before that point<sup>2</sup>.

Within Book 1 of *Confessiones*, Augustine discusses his laments and despair over having received his classical Roman education because it distracted him from God. But within these laments, we get two important pieces of information, the primary issues Augustine has with classical Roman education and what exactly occurred in that education. The first is easier to draw out. “For what is more wretched than a wretch who feels no sorrow for himself but mourns the death of Dido, caused by her love for Aeneas, yet does not mourn his own death, caused by a lack of love for you, O God” (*Confessions*, 1.13.21). Augustine’s biggest complaint about classical Roman education reflects the Christian principles he came to articulate and live by as an adult: The problem with education, as he sees it retrospectively, is that it doesn’t center God. In fact, in his recollection of reading the *Aeneid*, he feels strongly that the curriculum directed his attention away from God and instead to worldly–fictive–things. And this belief expanded to all

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<sup>2</sup> For this portion of the paper, I will be using Thomas Williams' translation of *Confessions* and R.P.H. Green's of *De doctrina Christiana* as I will later translate and analyze the original Latin in detail during Chapter 3.

of the Roman education systems, especially the teachers. “Suppose I were to ask these teachers whether it is true, as the poet says, that Aeneas once went to Carthage...the well-instructed would say no, it is not true. But if I were to ask how the name "Aeneas" is spelled, everyone who has learned this would give the correct answer...And if I were to ask which would be a greater hindrance in life, to forget how to read and write or to forget these poetic fancies, anyone not utterly out of his senses would know precisely how to answer.”(*Confessions*, 1.13.22) Here, Augustine is referencing how in the Aeneid, Aeneas travels to the land that would one day be called Carthage, but at the time within the book was not yet called that. Hence, if someone answered yes, they would not have the poem background to understand why that’s wrong. However, as Augustine points out, anyone with a simple education can spell Aeneas. So when asked if it would be better to forget the poetic background, he is asking if it would be better to forget the basics of education that help someone to read or write anything or if it would be better to lose the knowledge usually only granted to the elite. He is insinuating that the teachers, who would likely say that remembering the poems would be better, are lost in their own ideas of glory and what is right that they cannot see the truth of which is truly more useful. The worldly feelings like joy or pain that people get from reading, or the social status that can be gained from knowing these things, is nothing to Augustine.

This is one of the origins of the idea that gained popularity in Medieval times, one cannot enjoy art for art’s sake. Augustine is a firm believer that you can use things like literature properly, “for when I was learning empty trifles, you gave me your discipline; you have forgiven me the sins of my delights in such vanity. I did, after all, learn many useful words in the course of my studies” (*Confessions* 1.15.24). Augustine does not argue that literacy is useless, or that it should be denounced and forgotten, but rather that it must be repurposed from the way he was

originally taught it. A different approach and different teacher must design that curriculum.

There must be specific rules and orientations used to ensure that God is kept as the truth so one doesn't get lost as Augustine did in his youth. The way to do so is to use what was learned in classical Roman education, specifically the earlier teachings like reading and writing, and use them to honor God. Write and read things that honor God, that centers Him in everything.

This is explained no clearer than in Augustine's discussion of how to approach pagan literature in his work *De Doctrina Christina* ("On Christian Doctrine"). Here he speaks of how to still be able to use these texts that are so prevalent in the current culture of his day and have been taught to many people but do so in a way that won't lead people astray. He compares how the Jewish people, once freed from Egypt, used the treasures of the Egyptians for better uses than to glorify themselves as God commanded them to how Christians may be able to take things like the pagan writings and find elements in there that could be useful in a Christian context.

"Similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burden-some studies that involve unnecessary effort... but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction...

These treasures—like the silver and gold, which they did not create but dug, as it were, from the mines of providence, which is everywhere... must be removed by Christians... and applied to

their true function, that of preaching the gospel" (*De doctrina Christiana* 2.39-40). For

Augustine, he describes how he can use his classical education, no matter how much he hates it, for good and in service of God. He believes that throwing out pagan literature altogether is not going to work, but instead working around it and incorporating it into Christian education is key.

This is a point I will elaborate further on in Chapter three because interestingly, it's not as often talked about in pedagogical discussions of Augustine.

Equally as important as the musings on Christian ethics and educational culture are Augustine's descriptions of the structures and practices of Roman education. As Augustine puts it, hopping back to the *Confessiones*: "For I found those earliest lessons, in which I learned to read and write and do arithmetic...I was being given the capacity, which I acquired and still have, to read any writing that I come across and to write things myself, if I choose" (*Confessions* 1.13.20). Augustine has now laid out the first of two schools within Late Antique Pagan education, grammatical schooling. Grammatical schooling, or earlier teaching, is where children learned their letters and numbers and the basic rudiments of reading and writing. Rhetorical schooling, the later teachings he discusses in *Confessiones* is the schooling that Augustine is mainly critiquing. There, children learn to read and memorize the classics like Virgil or Homer and write convincingly. Indeed, this education lay at the heart of Roman legal and political culture—all those who participated were put through a rather uniform literary education, as Augustine describes. Augustine mentions within his writings "those later lessons in which I was forced to memorize the wanderings of Aeneas" (*Confessions* 13.20) and "This is the place to learn words! This is the place to acquire the eloquence that is so essential for persuasion and argument!" (*Confessions* 16.26). The second stage of classical Roman education was focused on acquiring the skills that would make one an elite, the ability to discuss and reference the classics, and the ability to argue and write like a "proper Roman citizen". These ideas, of course, are denounced by Augustine because of their focus on material gain over spiritual development and their upholding of class structures. "They did not see the use to which I would put the things they were compelling me to learn, beyond satisfying insatiable cravings of a wealth that was really poverty and a glory that was really disgrace" (*Confessions* 12.19). Augustine here insinuates that wealth was morally dubious and that Catholics should not strive for it, because it distracted from

the true goal of spiritual enlightenment. And so this aspect of education, the later part, which was only focused on skills that existed to assimilate and exist in the elite was disturbing and disgusting to him.

### **Past Critics**

So this is what Augustine says himself about education, or at least his own, which commentary allows for a general overview of the state of education in his time. But Classical Studies is living and breathing, unlike Augustine, and I'm far from the first person to think about Augustine as someone who had something to say about the topic. So, in order to properly analyze Augustine on my own, it seems necessary to do what classicists are wont to do: Look back at the past before treading forward. To use what has been said before to propel me forward and to fit my argument into the centuries-long discourse on the saint, both to understand how Augustine has been studied before and also so I can know what I agree or don't agree with. To do this, I am taking three of the most notable books on Augustine within education and using them to track the general arc of the discourse on Augustine and how it's evolved through time. What I've found is that the discourse follows the general trend of how looking at late antiquity has changed: the older books discuss education in terms of decline and the death of the Roman ideal in a practical sense, the books published the generation after that focus on some more social issues, and finally more modern books have begun to acknowledge the depth of thinking that can be found within late antique writers if one digs a bit deeper.

Within all three of these books, there is a relevant notion that I should pull out and highlight because it's the point I will be trying to disprove within the third chapter of this project. This is the idea that Augustine, in terms of the study of education, best serves only as a reference point. That he is useful in the discussion of the progression and evolution of education and



pedagogical thought because of the discussions of his own education within *Confessiones*.

Augustine does provide vivid and well-structured anecdotes of Roman classical education, the first book of *Confessiones* is ripe with them as seen earlier and he expands on these experiences slightly in other works like *De Doctrina Christina* (“On Christian Doctrine”) or *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (“On Catechizing the Undeveloped”). This is the main, and to some extent, only function Augustine serves for most critics of late antiquity which I will go on to argue against as I deeply disagree with it. He is not thought of as someone who is rethinking education, merely as a reporter. Frankly, it wasn’t until just 2022 that we had the first scholarly study that even approached Augustine as an educational reformer, *Education in Late Antiquity: Challenges, Dynamism, and Reinterpretation* by Jan Stenger. But before I can make this claim that I want to perhaps for the first time approach Augustine from not just a psychological but an educational psychology perspective, I have to show this is a novel thought and worthy of further pursuit. I must show that this may offer something not yet fully teased out of Augustine’s works.

### **History of Education in Antiquity: Marrou**

The book I will start with is by Henri Irénée Marrou, a French historian who focused on education, specifically in Late Antiquity, and who is most well-known for *History of Education in Antiquity*, originally written in 1948 in French, and his Christian ideals. The edition I read for this project, given that I do not speak French, is the 1964 translation by George Lamb. Marrou is firmly within the catastrophist outlook on Late Antiquity, viewing the fall of the Roman Empire to be the beginning of the end for education for a long while. The book is clearly outdated in much of what it proposes, and it shines through in how Marrou speaks about Christian education in particular.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marrou refers to any space that wasn't Greco-Roman as “barbarian”. I will quote the book directly, however, I will not be adopting that language within my own analysis.

Marrou's view of Christian education within this time can be easily summed up with this quote: "Never throughout the whole of antiquity, except for a few particular cases, did the Christians set up their own special schools. They simply added their own specifically religious kind of training... on to the classical teaching"(Marrou 423-424). He saw no change in education or its theory happening within this time because, in his eyes, the church merely adopted what was already there. He mentions no change in attitude toward teaching beyond the conversations about the role of pagan literature within Christianity, to which he mentions that "Christianity was born in Hellenistic Palestine and developed in the midst of Graeco-Roman civilization-and it was everlastingly affected by it" (Marrou 424). By no change in attitude, I mean that Marrou doesn't see any sort of reform or attempt to reimagine what Christian education could look like because he doesn't consider the way Augustine is thinking about approaching pagan literature to be necessarily educational reform. Hence to him, there is no change to the schools because Christianity was born from the same culture that the schools were born from. They assimilated easily into the already existing structure without the need for change in Marrou's eyes, and there's nothing more to it.

And to the point of places other than the Greco-Roman, where there would be fewer influences like that, Marrou simply says: "In Egypt, in Syria, in Mesopotamia, Christianity brought new life into Egyptian and Aramaic, which had had no cultural value since Alexander's time...It was primarily so that [one] could translate the Bible... In each case the education was essentially religious from the very beginning" (Marrou 423). He spares no thought to the lands beyond the empire because, to him, they're nothing more than extensions off the base of the Greco-Roman Christian movements.

So where exactly does Augustine fit into this? Marrou brings Augustine up mainly within his capacity as someone who was classically educated and who later renounced elements of that past. He doesn't view him as an educator in the slightest. Tracking the mentions of Augustine within the book illuminates the lack of analysis Marrou puts towards Augustine's role as a theorist and thinker.

Marrou brings up Augustine a few times throughout the book as an aside, such as discussing his philosophical similarities to Plato or how he believed in teaching reading in parts of a whole but not delving into it at all. These asides are more for adding context to his current points than they are about investigating Augustine's own thoughts, as Marrou brings him up more for what Augustine reveals about the common proceedings of the grammar schools of Late Antiquity. He features as a source of factual evidence rather than as a theorist in these references. "The school depicted at the end of the fourth century by Ausonius, by St. Jerome and St. Augustine, was still on the whole the school of Quintilian's or even Horace's time"(Marrou 368). Augustine's career was picked apart for anecdotes to support Marrou's larger point that education did not change at all from the imperial period—in this case, with reference to the first century CE—to the late antique period of the fourth century CE, and that all education of that type eventually died off altogether.

The first relevant examination by Marrou of Augustine as a thinker and not just a resource revolves around, funnily enough, Augustine's opinions of corporal punishment which is a topic that will be discussed more heavily in Chapter 3. Marrou says: "St. Augustine trembled at the thought--he could never forget the sufferings he went through at school. Even when he was seventy-two, the old Bishop was still exclaiming, "Who is there who would not recoil in horror and choose death if he was asked to choose between dying and going back to his

childhood!"(Marrou 367). Marrou makes no further comment than this on what exactly Augustine thought about the use of punishment and instead goes on to talk about related conversations about the efficacy of corporal punishment. Yet we do find here the beginnings of thinking about Augustine as a player within the thought of late antique education. He describes Augustine as applying one of the "few pricks of conscience"(Marrou 367), potentially implying that Augustine may have had a hand in the start of thinking about whether corporal punishment was pedagogically effective given how outwardly he discussed hating his childhood because of it. But Marrou makes no such claim, and while he just barely hints towards Augustine as an educational reformer, he goes nowhere with the idea and seemingly abandons it altogether for other thinkers.

The rest of the conversation on punishment continues without Augustine, but he pops up again later in discussions of accessibility to education. Here he appears not in the context of his theory but instead in his context of learning. "He could only do his elementary schooling there, and like Virgil he had to go into a more important city...to study grammar and begin on rhetoric...when he was sixteen, and then for more advanced studies he went on to Carthage. Being fatherless and poor, he was unable to finish these. He too was "converted" to philosophy, when he was eighteen, but he had to be his own teacher- as a philosopher St. Augustine was a self-made man"(Marrou 397). Here we can see the beginnings of conversations about education, class, and accessibility. This is a common way that Augustine is brought up, as will be seen in Kaster: Augustine as student. Marrou uses him to illustrate how the great thinkers or aristocrats of his time were formed, and how it was uncommon that someone of a lower class could access such things. Here Augustine features less as someone thinking about and reforming education in his own right, and more as a case study key to historical understanding of the nature and

pragmatics of education. Marrou's central interest in this section is to point out how education, specifically higher education, became centered around large cities and that's how aspects of class and politics came to shape education not in curricula but simply in who could get it and where. Augustine, in reflecting on his struggles as a student, brings to light some of the structures that made education difficult to access and move through in the fourth century. He comes from a family that isn't very rich and doesn't live near big cities that have these schools, so he describes the trouble his family put in to get him his education and how he had to move across Roman North Africa to do it. He provides fantastic evidence to Marrou's point of education following not the state for guidance but the citizens themselves, where they settled, and who they deemed important for location and function. And that then shows why most of the people accessing education were those of the rich Roman elite, to whom at first Augustine was an outsider.

Augustine is later again brought up in his role as a rhetor and teacher of rhetoric, not with a focus on his curricula or pedagogical strategy, but rather his social standing. "When St. Augustine was a rhetor in Milan he had hopes of the same sort of advancement: he describes himself shortly before his conversion haunting the waiting rooms of the various ministries ...hoping to get some such post as praeses through influence" (Marrou 416). Augustine provides again good evidence of the structure in which teachers and educated men operated, that being one where rhetors were chosen for higher positions and political power. Marrou then makes the argument that this sort of thinking and promotion mirrors that of the classical era well, as both eras believed that "the art of rhetoric teaches men not only to write properly, but to think properly and to act properly" (Marrou 416). This again adds to his hypothesis that late antiquity offers nothing but a continuance of classical education.

The most interesting passage of Marrou is the one where he discusses Augustine as specifically a Christian teacher. Marrou makes a point to separate the idea of classical education and Christian education, as he viewed classical education as that of the grammar schools and rhetors while Christian education was solely that of good morals and faith. And yet, even with this separation, Marrou discusses Augustine as an educational theorist. “Theodore of Mopsuestia and others, show that the great bishops of the fourth century attained a remarkably high standard of teaching. St. Augustine, again, in his treatise *De catechizandis rudibus*(On Catechizing the Undeveloped), written in about 405, produced a theory of "how to begin religious instruction" that was studied for centuries because of the excellence of its method”(Marrou 421). Marrou views Augustine as a masterful Christian teacher, someone whose ideas were utilized well later on and in his time to teach Christian values. He also later mentions him in the context of episcopal schooling, which is the training young men took to become higher church officials. But he still views all of this as entirely separate from classical education, and in fact argues that Christianity is later forced to accept classical education because they lack what it provides. “If the Christian religion was to persist and spread, if it was to continue its teaching activity, or even merely to preserve its form of worship, there was an absolute minimum of literary culture that it could not do without. Christianity is an intellectual religion and cannot exist in a context of barbarism”(Marrou 421). According to Marrou’s larger theory, education is not changed by Christianity, at least not to a very noticeable extent, but instead, Christianity is changed by education, being compelled to assimilate into the culture of the time which was still very Roman. He still sees no change to education itself, just the people who use it.

He does acknowledge the tension held within this change though, and how “adopting the classical system of education did not mean accepting the culture it subserved”(Marrou 426).

Augustine is referenced here for the beliefs he held on how pagan culture and literature were ignorant and to be condemned. However, Marrou moves on past this to discuss how in the end Christians accepted classical schooling and did not end up making something separate to it. “Being thoroughly awake to the fact that the "scholarly" and "bookish" aspect of Christianity made it essential for the faithful to have some sort of literary culture, [Christianity] could see no other solution than to allow them to be educated in schools of the traditional Hellenistic type”(Marrou 428). Marrou speaks of this assimilation in terms of acceptance and defeat, that Christians accepted this not because it was their choice necessarily but because it was the only option available to them and they weren’t able to think otherwise.

Marrou ends his section on Christianity and schooling, and likewise his discussions on Augustine, in the dismal and bleak way he viewed education at the time. “Remarkable things were achieved by the great bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries...but there is nothing to show that they ever created anything like a Christian school. They managed to reach a remarkable level of personal Christian culture...But they made no attempt to turn it into a real system of education”(Marrou 437-438). Marrou states clearly that while Augustine made large cultural changes, and wrote on education in ways he acknowledges were used for centuries to come, he sees nothing of an actual educational theorist or reformer in Augustine. He even claims that “as regards actual teaching establishments, far from there being any progress from the third century to the fourth, there was a distinct retrogression”(Marrou 437). Christianity did not revolutionize Roman education in Marrou’s eyes; rather, Christians reluctantly accepted the educational system until they eventually threw it out in favor of solely religious schooling in the Medieval period. This to Marrou signaled “the general disintegration of culture in the West”(Marrou 449) because “the schoolmasters in these Dark Ages did their best to keep their pupils away from all

contact with a culture which they regarded as being far too sympathetic towards pagan traditions” (Marrou 449). And, as evidenced earlier in his separation between classical education and Christian education, true culture and education lay in that of the classics and in losing focus on those texts and cultures, the world fell to the Dark Ages in the eyes of Marrou.

Marrou’s interpretation is, as stated earlier, now outdated among scholars of ancient education. But he represents a lot of the early thinking on late antique education, and subsequently that of Augustine as an educational thinker and reformer. For a very long time, people thought of Late Antiquity as encompassing the slow death of classical education which would only pick back up in the Renaissance. Augustine was studied as someone who was raised classically educated but later denounced it in various ways. His educational trajectory therefore often provided a case study for the slow rejection and decline of classical education, and that’s all scholars appreciated him for in the education sphere. He was much more alluring for people studying the rise of Christian culture in terms of him as a theologian. His opinions or theories were less often discussed when it came to education as a valid way of tracking the educational theory of his time and what it was actually like or could be.

### **Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity: Kaster**

Despite the endurance of Marrou’s paradigm, the 1970s and 1980s brought a new wave of thinking about Late Antiquity, broadly speaking, and therefore also about Augustine and education. Here we get scholars who are focused on Augustine as a social reformer, as someone who helped create—as opposed to simply preserving—culture, and they view education as a subset of that culture. However, Augustine was not necessarily examined in terms of his capacity as an educational reformer but as a figure that would allow historians to study class and social power in late antiquity. There was still the belief that there was little change within



schooling until it finally died off in the Medieval period. One of the most well-known monographs from this era, which references Augustine heavily at points, is *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* by Robert Kaster. Written in 1988, it was Kaster's first book and reached great success. Wildly recognized as a cornerstone in the study of late antique education, Kaster investigates specifically the role of the grammarian in Roman society.

A professional teacher or tutor, a grammarian's job was to instruct primarily upper-class children how to read the classics and write with proper grammar. They were the first teacher most children encountered, before going on to learn more advanced reading and writing with a rhetorician, which Augustine would become at one point in his life. As said by Quintilian and quoted by Kaster as the best definition of the grammarian's role in education: "the grammarian's main contribution to those ends consisted of the 'knowledge of speaking correctly' and the 'explication of the poets.'"(11). The book is an examination of the way that grammarians function in late antiquity and how little their schools changed in Kaster's opinion despite the massive social and religious overhaul. But even more prevalently, the book is about how grammarians acted as social performers and honed and preserved their ability to give access to becoming one of the elite.

The way that Kaster uses and frames Augustine within his argument is in the tension between Augustine as a student and professor and Augustine as a convert. Most of what Kaster references him for is how Augustine later in life criticized secular education for being a hindrance towards being a good Christian. Within this though, Kaster illuminates a notion of class consciousness in Augustine, about how faith should not be ruled by the 'educated' and should instead be open to all. This is a distinct change from Marrou, who used Augustine as a

resource or as a case study for the reluctant acceptance of classical education by Christianity. Kaster doesn't care so much about the "collapse" of classical education as much he cares about how the grammarian became such a socially powerful figure and subsequently fell in power thanks to the "collapse". I put collapse in quotation marks, intentionally, for reasons that will be discussed with our final author. Kaster is concerned "not in how the schools were structured but in how the structure was maintained and in the clientele it served"(Kaster 24).

To start, Kaster situates Augustine within his own education and details how his experience lends evidence towards grammarians and their schools being vehicles of social mobility. This is a step further, a deeper analysis, of Marrou's view on late antique education. Marrou focused mainly on mobility within large cities, and how we can track the development or lack there using them. While Kaster, this is something that exists in cities mainly, but as we'll discuss, is also not just affecting those in the city but instead the greater social structure of the empire. The first point Kaster makes using Augustine's accounts is that of geographic mobility. He discusses how Augustine "received some preliminary education in his modest hometown before being sent to a larger center for further instruction"(Kaster 21). This is important to Kaster because it reveals the start of his social mobility argument, an education required "a marked geographic mobility and a close conformity to the patterns of upper-class life"(Kaster 21). Augustine, in receiving his education, gained access to these two characteristics. The geographic mobility helped him conform to upper-class life because "only the upper levels of the population were geographically mobile"(Kaster 22). And this is what eventually allowed Augustine access to the elite, because "the literary education combined with geographic mobility to produce social mobility"(Kaster 23). However, Kaster does acknowledge Augustine as somewhat outside this paradigm for two reasons. The first is that Augustine was not originally upper-class like most of

his classmates likely were and hence he wasn't necessarily perpetuating a cycle of privilege more so than unexpectedly entering it (Kaster 25). The second reason is his later utter denouncement of the whole system entirely. Kaster highlights a quote that Augustine said in *De Beata Vita* (On Blessed Life) where he made a comment on how learning under a grammarian was in some way suffering or a detriment to the person. "The statement that one's cousins had "suffered not even a grammarian" revealed as much about their social standing as it did about their linguistic and literary attainments. To make such a statement without blush or reproach, as Augustine did, signaled that one was stepping outside the culture of secular prestige"(Kaster 23). Kaster, from this, pulls the idea that Augustine is actively resisting the classical viewpoint of grammarians and beginning to openly attack them even. For most in his time, to say that studying under a grammarian was a bad thing and in fact escaping it was good would be a wild thought. It showed a deep radicalism against the past classical system, as Augustine viewed it as wrong to continue to uphold. As such, Augustine is Kaster's jump-off point to the argument of classism very clearly existing within the classical education system. Not only was education restricted to the elite, it was a notably bad thing.

But what does Kaster say about what Augustine thinks of education? Does he, like Marrou, remark only on the facts of his situation? Kaster primarily focuses on Augustine's scathing criticism of grammarians and pagan literature as worldly social forces that are often distracting for Christian readers and writers. This is part of, the cultural stance he takes later in his life after converting. "To each of them[Jerome and Augustine] the social good of the grammarian's profession continued to appear questionable, if not illusory; and for each, controlling the effects of his own education was a struggle set between scarcely reconcilable poles"(Kaster 81). Augustine not only viewed the grammarian as a potential social harm, as

Kaster sees it but he also is faced with the struggle of reconciling his classical education with his faith. He was educated in Latin and rhetoric, and can't undo that learning. So he is now faced with the question of what to do about it when he becomes a Christian man who wants to leave such worldly ignorance behind. He has to come up with an answer.

Kaster sees Augustine's answer to this question take shape within his speeches given in his sermons and within *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine). He spends some time talking about Augustine and the way that he wrote his speeches intentionally, "Augustine, when his preaching plays off the formidable *strepitus* of Cicero against the inviting sound of Scripture or the "grammarian's laws" against the "people's understanding"...It is the vivid, simple style of Augustine's preaching, fluent talk in plain language"(Kaster 83). Kaster highlights how Augustine, after reflecting on his education, specifically rebels against it by making his sermons accessible by using more vernacular language. He even says that "Augustine wanted such a style to reach a largely uneducated audience"(Kaster 84). Here Kaster places Augustine among the first movers directly against the grammarian from the Church, a movement that would continue after him. He's placing him as an educational theorist, not necessarily in complaints only about the curricula but the purpose of education and who it should serve.

Augustine, in Kaster's words, used this style of preaching also to discipline other men who received an education as he did. "It was a chastening reminder for the learned that what was important, true, and correct— in language as in substance—could not be defined by external standards. Those standards belonged rather to the arsenal of worldly competition; they divided the community"(Kaster 84). Augustine sees this issue of learned men losing sight of what should be most important as a Christian, and Kaster cites this as what motivates him to write *De doctrina Christiana*. "The work sketches for clergy and educated laymen the possibility of an

alternative literary culture based on Scripture. As a necessary part of its argument, the work divorces communication from the authority of classical grammar and rhetoric”(Kaster 84).

Kaster describes the work as such, directly framing Augustine as someone proposing a different way to go about education, though Kaster discusses it in a cultural sense. Augustine speaks on how, to a Christian, the classic way of doing things relies on man-made ideals of what the correct things are. The grammarian is implicated in this whole issue. “What then is soundness of speech [*integritas locutionis*, the traditional province of the grammarian and his rules] save the preservation of an alien habit [*aliena consuetudo*] supported by the authority of ancient speakers?”(Kaster 85) is the portion Kaster directly quotes to show Augustine’s stance. Augustine is claiming that to follow the grammarian is to follow someone who cares more for man-made rules than those of God.

Kaster then brings up the potential counterargument of a grammarian that “soundness of speech was definitely no simple matter of habit and authority but was founded on the nature of the language”(Kaster 85). To combat this, Kaster brings up the argument of another Christian writer Arnobius who claimed that no speech comes from nature, it comes from humans. And so hence, why care about grammar and speech and fancy style when Augustine can “devalue the artifices of the grammarians as nothing more than the conventional adherence to the authority of the past”(Kaster 85), which Christians should not be concerning themselves with since wealth and power and status are not things they should strive for. Kaster neatly lays out the argument Augustine made that allows for the grammarian’s authority to be brushed to the side in this new cultural era since the social status they allow people to reach doesn’t matter to Christians. He presents Augustine as a reformer who allows for the switch away from the grammarian and their

classist systems to ones more open to the general public, which better aligns with Christian ideas of community and order

However, in the end, Kaster makes a very interesting claim regarding the influence of Augustine and his ideas. He says that “Augustine's views were not decisively influential until the deep confusion of the sixth century when Cassiodorus could find in the *De doctrina Christiana* part of his formula for stripping the humanities of their vanity and including them as a branch (and nothing more) of divinity”(Kaster 88). He builds Augustine and his ideas up, only to say that contemporarily, Augustine has little to no influence on the culture and education of his time. Yet again, we see some form of the idea that education and its theory did not change in Augustine’s time. Kaster insists that the change only happened much later than Augustine and his contemporaries. And since the book focuses on the grammarian, Kaster doesn’t mention Augustine’s foray into teaching again later with the monastic and episcopal schools, meaning that again there is an era that sees Augustine as developing some amount of theory related to education, but which still refuses to emphasize his position as an educational theorist.

### **Education in Late Antiquity: Challenges, Dynamism, and Reinterpretation: Stenger**

Released just in 2022, Jan Stenger’s *Education in Late Antiquity: Challenges, Dynamism, and Reinterpretation*, 300-550 CE presents a new angle for thinking about education in Late Antiquity. The book seeks to fill a perceived hole in the literature on Late Antiquity education. As he states, “Existing scholarship tends to concentrate on the practicalities of education in the late Roman Empire... our investigation aims to show that we are missing out a crucial dimension of education if we neglect the theorization made by educational thinkers, be it explicit or implied” (Stenger 2).

Stenger claims that past research has focused on individual teachers, schools, or curricula instead of changes in how education should be used. The current view, he argues, both misses out on the progress made but also denies Late Antiquity its rightful place as a precursor to modern education. His book is a comprehensive overview of the largest movements of the time in educational theory, Pagan and Christian and Eastern and Western, in an attempt to show how theorists at the time explored “what education means for an individual’s entire life after reaching adulthood, suggesting the superiority of *Bildung* (culture) over *Ausbildung* (education, training)” (Stenger 13). The most notable shift that Stenger charts is the education evolution from a social marker of elite status to an ethical practice for cultivating a good life.

Stenger brings a refreshing view of Augustine, who is treated here as one of the early thinkers of education as both a lifelong process and one ultimately with the goal of self-improvement. Stenger’s stand is that Augustine helps to further thoughts on what the purpose of education is and suggests ways to potentially achieve this even if he didn’t necessarily put it into practice. He acknowledges that educational reform needs not be merely constituted in practical or tangible change but instead may involve more philosophical thinking on why we do what we do so that later we can change it. By positioning Augustine in this way, Stenger can show how Augustine was not just present within education theory in Late Antiquity but was one of the stepping stones for those who came after him.

This is a distinct change from Marrou or Kaster, who only ever used Augustine in his thinking about his own education and rarely on how to better pedagogy. These are the thinkers that Stenger says haven’t expanded to try and move away from the decline movement of looking at Late Antiquity, and instead would rather focus on education as a social structure of the empire rather than it in its actual self. Stenger calls for a further movement into finding the interesting

parts of Late Antiquity education and how it stands on its own separate from its predecessor of Roman education.

Stenger's exploration of Augustine is focused mainly on his ponderings on the question of why education should exist. As someone who was educated in the classical Roman way, Stenger says "What men like the disaffected young teacher Augustine... were looking for was personal fulfillment, a transformative experience generated by a new educational paradigm" (Stenger 13). Augustine, according to Stenger, was focused on constructing education as a way to find the self and form good Christian ethics over and against the prior Roman way of education, which fostered the wrong qualities: a concern for style over substance, for material wealth over spiritual fulfillment, for influence over truth. We see this point made by Kaster earlier, but Stenger pushes it further.

Throughout the handful of chapters in which Stenger either focuses on or references Augustine, he uses language not often seen in discussions of Augustine's educational theory. He describes Augustine, particularly the younger Augustine of the Cassiciacum dialogues, as an insecure man trying to find his place within his newly found faith as a former teacher and rhetorician. "With similar intentions, the young Augustine sought to bridge the gap between the profession of the teacher and the life of contemplation essential for one's own perfection. Yet, to him, the problem was existential and caused a deep personal crisis" (Stenger 177). The basis of some of Augustine's early theory, according to Stenger, is his grappling with one of the core cultural problems of Late Antiquity: What is to be done about classical education in a Christianizing world?

The question then was not "what is wrong with classical education", notably. Instead, Stenger frames Augustine in how he "devoted a considerable part of his works, probably more



than any other Christian writer, to the discussion of the legitimate place of education and rhetoric in the church. Frequently returning to the question of whether skilled eloquence should serve the spread of the gospel, Augustine was also clear that teaching was at the heart of preaching and catechesis” (Stenger 26). Stenger makes a careful distinction, that Augustine was not talking about classical education to denounce it but rather to grapple with and negotiate with it. In Stenger’s reading, Augustine appears as one eager to try and rethink Roman educational systems and rework his teachings to be useful to him as a preacher, because to Augustine who was a teacher of rhetoric for several years, being a Bishop was the natural evolution of that occupation once he realized that God was truth and not Roman ideals. The grappling that ensues for Augustine is more theoretical and epistemological—concerned with the nature of knowledge and learning—level than practical or social in the ways that Kaster and Marrou would have discussed it. Augustine is trying to figure out the mental changes that had to be made to use classical literature, which can later be made into pedagogy, but not in the same way as scholars perhaps were looking for in the past.

To demonstrate this particular angle of this discussion being more theoretical than practical, Stenger chooses some almost psychological language. When describes Augustine’s experiences as “existential” and “a deep personal crisis”, he is framing it far differently than other scholars. He makes it less about an otherworldly contemplation and more about a personal issue, grounding Augustine in his own experiences. He invites us to look at Augustine not just as a Christian philosopher and clergyman but also as a teacher, a man who once did the things he later renounced as a job. “The freshly retired teacher Augustine was still optimistic about the usefulness of liberal studies” (Stenger 81), he says about some of Augustine’s earlier writings. Much of Augustine’s educational theory comes from his own background. Stenger describes

Augustine's own education as "the baggage of the classical school" (Stenger 26). He cannot fully escape his past as a member of the liberal arts, and so for a lot of his life, Augustine spends his time trying to fit it into his Christian lifestyle. Augustine bases much of his early advice and education on his experience, both in terms of the potential usefulness of his classic education and also how to grapple with coming from that background.

Stenger presents Augustine as almost a rehabilitator for those like him in his early writings, a guide to those who were poisoned by the Roman Education System. The primary example of this is in Augustine's *De Catechizandis Rudibus* where he lays out his imaginings of the three types of learners a clergyman may run into and what support they need. Stenger's language in this section is also notable, in the way that he describes Augustine as a teacher who deeply cares about the backgrounds of the people he is teaching and the importance of the teacher-student relationship. Other scholars contemporary to Augustine were far less concerned with this idea of the teacher and student since the myth of men learning the bible with no teacher was popular then. But Stenger goes as far as to say that Augustine "considers the essential role played in teaching by the mutual love of teacher and pupil" (Stenger 31). To describe the relationship as love strong implies that Stenger thinks Augustine sees a deep and necessary relationship between teacher and student, instead of the teacher playing a more background role.

Similarly to Kaster, Stenger highlights Augustine's sensitivity to class structures. But rather than focusing on Augustine's theories on how to remove them, Stenger instead taps into how Augustine ensures his teachings are cognizant of that. "The teaching situation of the catechumenate, thus, leads Augustine to a categorization of people according to the education they received, implying as well different social milieus" (Stenger 28). To Stenger, one of the more important things in *De Catechizandis Rudibus* is not the acknowledgment that classical

education raises social class, but rather that a background in classical education makes future teaching efforts different. *De Catechizandis Rudibus* covers three types of learners: those brought up in the liberal studies (*liberales doctrinae*), the grammarian trained, and the illiterate and other with less education as Stenger puts it. Within the text, the first one is treated with the most amount of time, the second to an extent, and the third has scant guidance given to them. But why would this be? Wouldn't it make sense to instead have more time devoted to how to teach those who haven't learned before?

As Stenger points out, in the eyes of Augustine, a background in learning actually makes teaching more difficult. "His briefness might also indicate that he regarded higher education as an obstacle greater than lack of it to becoming a Christian" (Stenger 30). Because these people have had past experiences in education, they have more to unlearn. Augustine, thus, makes sure to lay out specific instructions on how to approach these learners in a way that will open up new ways of approaching literature that they were instructed to always follow before so they might receive the benefits that Augustine sees within learning: closeness to God.

The choice to highlight Augustine's categories by the education received and social environment has Stenger placing Augustine as a reformer concerned with more than just one way of thinking or teaching. It highlights his movability and his flexibility which he also uses to contemplate education as a whole. The way that someone achieves self-fulfillment may not always be the same as someone else however will hopefully lead to the same salvation is the conclusion Stenger seems to be guiding us towards. "Augustine's programme of education is to make sure that all initiates, regardless of their educational background, share the same, Catholic understanding of the Bible" (Stenger 31). Augustine, as Kaster brought up, has a radical view on how accessible things should be to everyone. He was a firm believer that everyone should have

access to Christ and that all were welcome. So, it makes sense that this would apply to the lessening of the power of the Roman education system so that the uneducated would not be left behind but also that educated men would not be cast from being able to learn how to properly read the Bible because of the corrupting influence. As Stenger states, Augustine “utilizes pedagogy for building a united community”(Stenger 32). Being able to give a proper education, a Christian education, to everyone was a key issue for Augustine because he believed in a great equalizing. That anyone who chooses to learn and better themselves through education should be allowed to.

Stenger then jumps deep into *De Doctrina Christina*(On Christian Doctrine). It is important to note, as Stenger does, that a large portion of what is discussed here Augustine later denounces. However, I do not believe that makes it irrelevant to study, because these were still major works that contributed to the Christian culture of Late Antiquity no matter how much the man who wrote them despised them in the end.

In *De Doctrina Christina*, Augustine debates multiple topics but one of those mentioned all the way at the beginning of this chapter is the role of classical education in a Christian’s life. “*De doctrina Christiana* raises the central question of a unity of Christian faith and education, ...Our discussion will demonstrate that learning, if undertaken with the right, devotional attitude, even becomes a constitutive element of the religious life” (Stenger 82). Stenger’s argument here is that Augustine wants to reform Roman education for Christians to use, perhaps because this was written not long after he was a teacher of rhetoric himself. How does he do this, Stenger asks? By proposing a sort of guidebook for how to approach pagan literature in a Christian mindset. “The Christian appropriation of pagan education necessitates a spatial ‘exodus’ of learning, a decontextualization, before the instruments can be put back into the service of Christ”

(Stenger 84). This is the guiding principle of Augustine's rulebook that in order for the good to be taken out of the bad, think back to the treasures from the Egyptians, there must be a new context and approach.

This is necessary for Augustine because "for all its usefulness, the curriculum of the established education system cannot be followed unthinkingly in a Christian context because it fosters unchristian values, above all pride" (Stenger 83). Augustine essentially argues that reading pagan literature fosters bad values for a Christian who is attempting to better their life. And so, in order for reading to be fostered well, they must take what they are learning out of the context of Roman education and culture and superimpose it onto Christian culture. "Augustine asks readers to virtually celebrate the conversion of knowledge with a religious ceremony, to commemorate by studying Scripture the events that took place in Egypt and foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ" (Stenger 86). There is this ritual aspect that Augustine calls for in this rulebook, that the act of pulling the pieces of providence out of the rough is a religious act in itself.

And it's here that we get to an interesting justification from younger Augustine, that because this is a somewhat religious process, studying is perhaps an essential part of a good Christian's life. "We can even go a step further and say that Augustine's interpretation of the Old Testament ritual suggests an identification of education with the religious life. The ritualistic practice of studying, in analogy to the Passover, constitutes the subject as Christian and thus becomes a constituent of his religious being" (Stenger 87). There are strict guidelines that must be followed, "only if the Christian student is constantly aware of his religious affiliation and the ultimate goal of learning (and any human activity), can he engage in intellectual activities in the only acceptable manner"(Stenger 88), but it's more than possible and in fact even necessary.

Students, who are good and attentive at all times to God as any good Christian should be, can still study the old literature that still has this grip on the society of Late Antiquity. And in all this discussion Augustine is, as Stenger puts it, making almost this radical claim that “learning is an activity that constitutes, and exhibits, religious identity”(Stenger 88). That it can be not just some sort of vice but instead an instrument to get closer to God.

There is the aspect that part of this studying is meant to be the studying of Scripture itself, that good Christians are meant to be studying the Bible and not just pagan literature. But this all just fits into Stenger’s larger point of Augustine trying to reform education for all people. He writes this guidebook for both the educated and uneducated, because “ he wants to enable readers of the Bible, not only clergy but also laypeople, to overcome any difficulty they hit upon, by applying hermeneutical rules, without the help of another interpreter” (Stenger 82). All of this thinking, all of this almost curriculum lined out, is all for the express purpose of ensuring that a Christian no matter who they may be can learn on their own. They will possess the skills to achieve salvation on their own, however, their journey looks, because Augustine recognizes that it cannot be the same for all.

## **Conclusion**

It is here that Stenger leaves Augustine as an educational thinker and reformer, and again brings him back to the discussion of Augustine the student, which isn’t overly useful for this paper. Instead, I want to go over the general arch of what we have seen from past critics. We have seen Marrou, who wrote on Augustine in his capacity as a reporter of the structure and function of Roman education in Late Antiquity, and as an example of how education didn’t change and eventually declined to nothing. Kaster used Augustine as a case study on the function of the grammarian, and how his comments on his education and the moral lowness of the

grammarians illustrated the social and political power they held within the social structures that were still hanging around in Late Antiquity. Finally, we have Stenger, who has begun to think about Augustine as someone who is deeply concerned with the purpose of education. As someone who proposes mostly theoretical changes on what education's purpose should be, the betterment of the self to God, but also some practical changes through his *De doctrina Christiana*.

And yet still I feel there's more that can be done here. In these books, the scholars have taken Augustine from this insulated bubble of Late Antiquity studies and sometimes Christian studies. They've investigated him only in his own setting, in his own time, and compared to mostly contemporary scholars. One of my favorite movements I've seen in modern times is the aspect of bringing ancient literature to the present day. That is what makes these works so alive today, how they can in some ways still speak to our experiences today. Augustine's theories on things like original sin still echo in Catholicism today, so who is to say we can't find pieces of things that would later emerge as large topics in education or educational psychology in Augustine's educational thinking? I believe we can, and I'm confident that from this, I can gain this perspective of Augustine that I originally was searching for on what he did in his extraordinary time that maybe I could use as a solution for our own time. Find a solution from another source, but put it into the language that will make it actually applicable to us.

**Chapter 3: An Answer Through Time: What Does Augustine Say About Education**

**Post-Crisis?**

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## Introduction

It is now time for me to throw my own hat into the ring, or rather, to take my own shot at doing some analysis. In chapter one I touched on and established multiple psychological ideas, specifically within educational psychology, and described how they are applied to educational settings. In chapter two, I discussed how scholars had examined Augustine in his late antique educational context—which evokes some striking parallels to our own—and noted a deficit in their appreciation for Augustine as an educational theorist, rather than just as a source of facts for education in the late Roman world. Now I want to use these terms and these understandings to take a new lens for examining Augustine; that is, I want to look at Augustine not as a classicist but as an educational psychologist.

Augustine was prolific—so much so that the seventh-century encyclopedist Isidore of Seville jokingly suggested that anyone who claimed to have read all of Augustine’s works was a liar. Many of his texts have elements of proto-psychological ideas within them, and not just epistemological ideas about the nature of knowledge or how learning happens, but also proposals for concrete reforms to instructional designs that are flawed or could be improved. For this project, however, I want to focus on just three of his texts that I think establish at least his early understandings and intellectual struggles with education as a recent convert and former rhetorician. These texts are *De magistro*, *Confessiones*, and *De doctrina Christiana*. They represent the educational theory of early Augustine: what he thought about the role of the teacher, what he thought of his past education in his ‘autobiography’<sup>4</sup>, and how he approaches rehabilitating and reusing the mainstream educational system within the new system that he is proposing. While Jan Stenger was correct in pointing out that Augustine is clearly thinking

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<sup>4</sup> Autobiographies weren’t a thing during Augustine’s time, but *Confessiones* is regarded at times as the first autobiography.

differently in his works than just solely going to Christian education or solely denouncing pagan education forever, we can take further steps in our analysis. I believe, within Augustine's writings, I can see an example of another teacher whose entire foundation for that education was shaken even if the system has not yet collapsed. I see another teacher grappling with the right way to instruct, to make up for this issue that has appeared post-crisis. I believe that in taking the time and knowledge to look at Augustine fully, that is looking at him as a fellow educator from a modern perspective, I might be able to find an answer to my question of what to do post-covid from someone who actively lived and changed his teachings because of a large cultural and physical crisis not unlike ours.

### **De magistro**

The first of the three writings is *De magistro*. *De magistro* is a dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus, where the two are engaged in a dialogue on language and Augustine is actively trying to teach and reflect on the job of a teacher from his converted worldview. The dialogue takes place after his conversion in the late 380s when he takes time away from the world to live for a time in a beautiful locale and far away from the life of a Roman Elite. Augustine took the time for existential reflection, and this is the product of one of those musings. It is, at its core, a book more about signs and language than it is teaching. Augustine is talking about how we understand things through symbols not because the symbols mean something in themselves but because we contemplate them in our own mind and find them coordinated to something true, and the operations of sense-making happen because the truth of God is within us. The two debate how symbols function, how humans understand them, and what language really is.

Even with the focus being less on education, there are sections with rich opportunities for psychological and educational analysis. In the twelfth chapter, Augustine explains to his son how it is not truly the teacher making the student understand, but rather that the teacher introduces the question or idea and the student within themselves works it out and learns through an internal process.

<p><i>12.40 sed tunc quoque noster auditor, si et ipse illa secreto ac simplici oculo videt; novit quod dico sua contemplatione, non verbis meis. Ergo ne hunc quidem doceo vera dicens, vera intuentem; docetur enim non verbis meis, sed ipsis rebus, Deo intus pandente, manifestis: itaque de his etiam interrogatus respondere posset.</i></p>	<p>But then our listener, if they also see those things with their secret and simple eye, they have come to understand what I say by their own contemplation, and not by my words. Therefore I do not even teach this person when speaking truths, but I teach this person who is seeing truths; indeed, they are taught not by my words, but by reality itself, God making these things manifest within. And so having been asked about these things, they would be able to answer.</p>
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Augustine makes God central to that internal process—even making God indistinguishable from the process itself. God in some way allows the idea to be learned within the student’s mind. The word I have translated here as reality is *rebus*. This word generally means things, or matter. The choice to have the translation read “reality” is because it hits more closely to what Augustine is trying to communicate, that it is more a person's experience of the world that teaches than the teacher. The teacher is there to present the question or the subject, but cannot directly by their

own efforts make the student understand. That understanding is done solely within the learner's mind. For him, that necessitates the presence of God, as God is in all things and is truth itself. But taking this from the perspective of a psychologist, there are some interesting parallels to modern ideas of learning and knowledge acquisition. Augustine is advocating for a cognitive understanding of knowledge acquisition, that the process of learning is not just a matter of behaviors reinforced and acted out, but rather that in some way things are fitted together within the mind. I now must make the obvious disclaimer that there is a level on which Augustine cannot be said to parallel exactly modern psychological thought, and that's in his religious beliefs. I do, however, see a parallel here between Augustine's idea of God and the theory of schemas discussed in Chapter 1. In the same way that schemas are recalled and new information is added onto them in cognitivism and constructivism, so does God make new ideas manifest in the minds of people according to Augustine.

There's also the understanding here that people, had they encountered a question or problem themselves, could look at it alone and figure it out to some extent. Augustine goes to an extreme level here, saying that because God is truth and helps make manifest things in our heads, that anyone could know anything if they knew just the right question to ask themselves. But a less extreme view of this could be seen as a form of discovery learning. Augustine says that he as teacher merely presents the issue, and it is the learner who looks within themselves and uses their imagination to gain—even construct—the answer. That's nearly exactly the philosophy of discovery learning: a teacher presenting students with evidence or a question and allowing them to use their own imagination and problem-solving abilities, which everyone has but must be trained, in order to come to a conclusion. The distinction here is that for discovery learning, instead of God validating and manifesting the correct answer within someone's head, the teacher

performs a similar role. They are there as a fact-checker and guide to help facilitate that meaning making.

Later on in *De magistro*, in the fourteenth chapter, Augustine lays out both a preliminary critique of the current system and his personal ideas of how education truly works.

<p><i>14.45 Num hoc magistri profitentur, ut cogitata eorum, ac non ipsae disciplinae quas loquendo se tradere putant, percipiantur atque teneantur? Nam quis tam stulte curiosus est, qui filium suum mittat in scholam, ut quid magister cogitet discat? At istas omnes disciplinas quas se docere profitentur, ipsiusque virtutis atque sapientiae, cum verbis explicaverint, tum illi qui discipuli vocantur, utrum vera dicta sint, apud semetipsos considerant, interiorem scilicet illam veritatem pro viribus intuentes. Tunc ergo discunt: et cum vera dicta esse intus invenerint, laudant, nescientes non se doctores potius laudare quam doctos; si tamen et illi quod loquuntur sciunt.</i></p>	<p>Surely teachers do not profess this, that their own thoughts, rather than the studies which they reckon themselves to convey in speaking, are perceived and grasped? For who is so foolishly curious, to send their own son to school to learn what the teacher thinks? But when they have explained verbally all those studies, which they profess to teach, of virtue itself and of wisdom, then those who are called students deliberate within themselves as to whether truths have been said, examining that inner truth according to their own abilities. Then therefore they learn, and when they discover inside themselves that truth has been uttered, they praise their teachers, not realizing that they do not really praise teachers, but rather ones having been taught, if yet those men also know what they say.</p>
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<p><i>Falluntur autem homines, ut eos qui non sunt magistros vocent, quia plerumque inter tempus locutionis et tempus cognitionis, nulla mora interponitur; et quoniam post admonitionem sermocinantis cito intus discunt, foris se ab eo qui admonuit, didicisse arbitrantur.</i></p>	<p>But people are deceived such that they call some folks teachers who are not, because for the most part no delay is inserted between the time of speech and the time of understanding. And since within themselves, they learn quickly following the instruction of the speaker, they think that they have learned externally from the one who instructed.</p>
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To Augustine, learning is not about the teachers teaching, as that's not how education functions. Rather the teachers have already learned these subjects and now present the guiding questions and information that lead them to gain their understanding, and it is the students pondering these questions where learning happens and meaning is made. It is not the teacher's explanations or understandings that impress this knowledge but the facts and questions themselves. Where he makes one of his most foundational claims about learning in is where he suggests that, because the time between when instruction and learning happens is short and passes so quickly, people don't realize it is an internal process. They impute their learning to the speaking teacher rather than to their internal construction of truth and meaning. And that's interestingly enough part of the complaint that behaviorism issues against models that seek to emphasize the role of mental processes in learning, as their argument is that only behavior in the real world can be observed. But Augustine presents a comeback to this in his idea that even though the process of learning is quick, it would be simply wrong to say people learn externally.

Another word for external learning, if we want to stay consistent with the psychological terms, would be direct learning. How does Augustine make such a bold claim that direct learning does not occur? It's simple: the teachers are not teaching their understandings, they are teaching elements of the subject itself. If direct learning was occurring, in Augustine's eyes, each student would have the same understanding of the subject that the teacher does. But they don't, because people don't send their children to school to get the teacher's knowledge. They send them to acquire knowledge of the subjects themselves. So if children are gaining a different understanding than the teacher, however slight, that means something other than direct learning must be occurring. Behaviorism does not account for learning on the conceptual level. Even if the children procedurally learn how to read or write, that doesn't explain things like the different reactions to writing which will come up later. It's like the explanation of discovery learning from my first chapter. A teacher can present primary sources from the time, or even the facts of dates and political ideologies from a time, but it is the students making sense of that in their own heads that leads to a true understanding of the actual deeper context and meaning of what was occurring then. The teacher cannot teach that understanding, they can only give the guiding information that can lead a student to said understanding. Augustine is, at least in *De magistro*, arguing for a strong cognitive perspective on learning.

### **Confessiones**

The next text to examine is Augustine's most famous, the *Confessiones*. This text, written after his conversion and around a decade after *De magistro*, examines Augustine's life before his conversion and some of his theories and theology regarding memory and thought. The key part we can pull out here though, for the sake of an educational psychological review, involves his scathing critiques of the Roman educational system. The first quote for our consideration comes

from Book 1, where Augustine discusses the merits and pitfalls of the education he received as a youth thanks to his family's hard work.

<p><i>1.13.20 nam utique meliores, quia certiores, erant primae illae litterae, quibus fiebat in me et factum est et habeo illud, ut et legam, si quid scriptum invenio, et scribam ipse, si quid volo, quam illae, quibus tenere cogebam Aeneae nescio cuius errores oblitus errorum meorum et plorare Didonem mortuam</i></p>	<p>For surely those first letters were better, by which letters it was coming about in me, and it did come about, and I possess that ability, both to read if I discover something written, and to write myself if I want to write something –better because they were more certain than those by which I was forced to know the wanderings of some Aeneas, having forgotten my wanderings and to lament the death of Dido.</p>
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Already we can see again an aspect of the cognitive mentality in Augustine. He laments that he was forced to read the Aeneid as a child, as it distracted him from the light of God. He saw it as an exercise in futility, as it taught him no new skills or any knowledge that was truly useful, but was instead recitation. But he praises his early education, which would have happened in grammar school. The grammar here, no pun intended, is difficult to parse. Essentially Augustine is saying that the early lessons were the one that gave him the tools or skills to read and write. They gave him the ability to explore texts beyond that of which his teacher would introduce, like say the Bible. Augustine sees the ability to read, unlike his opinion on his history of reading specific texts, as a blessing God granted to him. His skill at writing is something he squirrels away from use for mortal purposes, like he did in his youth by becoming



a Roman elite which he later deeply regrets, and instead sees them as a fantastic opportunity to spread the word of God.

He specifically sees his later lessons, which would have been recitations, practice in rhetoric, and readings of already written texts like the Aeneid as sinful. They taught him nothing new that he could take and use elsewhere, distracted him from what was important, and didn't teach him anything good. There was a focus on doing things in one specific way and understanding certain references, in an almost pedantic sense<sup>5</sup>, rather than learning about life and reality in ways that could be put to use in other contexts besides academics too. We see here again a pushback against behaviorism, against seeing learning as gaining a skill or procedure in only one specific way and then practicing it over and over again. Instead, Augustine sees the ability to read and write something he gains that he then is almost morally obligated to apply it elsewhere. This sort of skill application, while present in all three learning theories, is most so present in constructivism as it appears here. The act of learning a skill and then transposing it onto a whole new context is something that is called out to be done.

A bit further on in Book One, Augustine again returns to critique specifically the old Roman educational system.

<p><i>1.16.26 sed uinum erroris, quod in eis nobis propinabatur ab ebriis doctoribus, et nisi biberemus, caedebamur nec appellare ad aliquem iudicem sobrium licebat.</i></p>	<p>But the wine of error was offered as drink to us in those things by drunk teachers, and unless we drank, we were beaten and we were not allowed to appeal to any sober judge</p>
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<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 2, I quote a different line of the Confessions, Confessions, 1.13.22, which highlights this point. His later teachers cared more about how the students learned the stories of characters that weren't even real than the essential ability to read and write.

And what is this critique if not the constructivist critique of behaviorism? Teachers who are convinced they're right, that there is one specific way to do things, force students to do it their way and they don't truly learn what they need to. The motivation does not come from the innate want to learn but instead from the threat of punishment. Augustine laments not just his inability to choose something else but also his inability to question at all. Because again, as he laid out in *De magistro*, questioning is the key to how humans learn to Augustine. If the education system does not allow for this exploration, this asking for the truth and not just what the students are supposed to say, then it's no good education at all and is instead actively harmful.

Augustine then finishes out his commentary on the old educational system in Book One with this quote about children and the purest form of learning that there is, which psychologists like even Vygotsky used as a basis for their theories, which is infant language acquisition.

<p><i>1.14.23 didici vero illa sine poenali onere urgentium, cum me urgeret cor meum ad parienda concepta sua, id quod non esset, nisi aliqua verba didicissem non a docentibus, sed a loquentibus, in quorum et ego auribus parturiebam quidquid sentiebam. hinc satis elucet maiorem habere vim ad discenda ista liberam curiositatem quam meticulosam necessitatem.</i></p>	<p>Truly [as an infant] I learned [language] without the overwhelming threat of punishment, since my heart was urging me to bring forth its own ideas, which would not happen, unless I had learned some words not from those teaching, but from those speaking, and in their ears/hearing I myself was bringing forth whatever I was feeling. Hence it is sufficiently clear that free curiosity possesses a greater power than frightful necessity for learning these things</p>
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Augustine, to clarify, is not against corporal punishment. He has a long and complicated opinion on the matter, thanks to his experiences both as a child in the Roman educational system where it was used heavily, and also as a Christian who saw it as a way to lead children back to the holy path of God. For Augustine, the fallen state of human beings means that the love of learning and the desire for God, while real and present in us, are not always enough to motivate corresponding action. Human nature, corrupted by original sin, demands external reinforcements to pursue these goods.

Here, in this quote, we see that he is against corporal punishment as a reinforcer for academic learning specifically. That in terms of moral development, being afraid of God, that corporal punishment can be a helpful tool. But in terms of fostering the natural curiositatem, which is a word that means curiosity as I translated it here which also comes from a root that can mean careful and diligent and devoted, it is not. There is some good and sacred aspect of learning to Augustine that must be preserved. If babies can learn language, and in fact even seem eager for it, there must be some natural human inclination to learn and grow. And that, to Augustine, can be directed towards the ultimate goal of worshipping God and should be done so. And babies do so not through direct instruction or learning, but through thorough exposure and learning through discovery and experience, which is very anti-behaviorist and pro-constructivist.

### **De doctrina Christiana**

The last book that I am using to discover the early thoughts on education that Augustine had that I might be able to draw things out from is *De doctrina Christiana*. This is the last of the three to be written, started in 397 and finished in 426 AD, and is specifically on how Augustine proposes Christian education should be set up as there was at the time clearly a space for it to start to emerge as the Roman educational system was dying out a bit with the incoming fall of

the western roman empire and with the radical rise of Christianity in its place as the dominant cultural influence. The really useful passages from this text for my purpose come from that of the second book, where Augustine debates how to approach the wealth of pagan books and studies and influences which were still very prominent and potentially useful.

<p><i>2.39 alienent etiam studium a superfluis et luxuriosis hominum institutis. Illa vero instituta hominum, quae ad societatem conviventium valent, pro ipsa huius vitae necessitate non negligant.</i></p>	<p>And furthermore, let them keep their study away from the superfluous and luxuriant institutions of men. But those institutions of men, which are helpful for social integration, let them not neglect in view of the demands of this life.</p>
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Here Augustine makes a point that, later in life, he grows to regret but at the time felt useful and helpful as a man who was classically educated and had so much knowledge that now under his new converted status was deemed sinful and wrong. He says here that, despite the necessary submission to the will of God and the moral demands to turn away from the wants of sinful mortal life, Christians still need to be able to function in society. That even when overhauling the educational system, or the social system at large, there are aspects from the past system that should remain and still be taught. This is not for the furthering of humanity as a God-following people, but instead to ensure the continuation of humanity and a functioning society. You can't praise God and create a proper Christian community if you constantly have to fight and argue with your neighbors because you refuse to work even slightly similarly. There are some things, some disciplines from the pagans, that are not only good to keep but necessary for the furthering of the human race as social creatures.

Finally, Augustine takes the idea that some of the things from the pagans might not be totally horrific but instead can be reworked and recontextualized or repurposed to their extreme. He claims that in fact, a good Christian, if they read those works or study those disciplines correctly, can gain from them the good learning that is needed to be a good Christian.

<p><i>2.40 sic doctrinae omnes gentilium non solum simulata et superstitiosa figmenta gravesque sarcinas supervacanei laboris habent, quae unusquisque nostrum duce Christo de societate gentilium exiens debet abominari atque devitare, sed etiam liberales disciplinas usui veritatis aptiores et quaedam morum praecepta utilissima continent, deque ipso uno Deo colendo nonnulla vera inveniuntur apud eos, quod eorum tamquam aurum et argentum, quod non ipsi instituerunt, sed de quibusdam quasi metallis divinae providentiae, quae ubique infusa est, eruerunt, et quo perverse atque iniuriose ad obsequia daemonum abutuntur, quum ab eorum misera societate sese animo separat, debet ab eis auferre Christianus ad usum iustum praedicandi evangelii.</i></p>	<p>Thus all the teachings of the pagans have not only counterfeit and superstitious figments and heavy burdens of unnecessary labor, which each one of us are responsible to detest and avoid, with Christ as our guide, departing from the society of the pagans, they also contain liberal disciplines more adaptable to the use of the truth as well as certain very useful moral principles and some truths about worshiping the one God himself are to be discovered among these people which just as the gold and silver of those people, which they did not make by themselves, but they dug up as if from the mines of divine providence, which has been distributed everywhere, and which they abuse perversely and wrongfully for the services of demons, since it separates them in spirit from their miserable society, a Christian ought to steal it [the</p>
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	teachings] from those men for the just purpose/use of preaching the gospel
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Augustine here is making the claim that within the pagan writings and teachings, so anything written even without the intention to praise God, contains aspects of truth. And because it contains aspects of truth, it contains aspects of providence and God, and so good Christians can still study these subjects specifically by modifying the way they approach the subjects. If there is some aspect of religious devotion, a ritual where the Christian has Christ be their guide, they can unearth these little truths and repurpose them for the good of the Lord. This is not an educational psychology principle per se, but rather, an example of the way another teacher grappled with the overwhelming hold a past education system had on their society. Similarly to the modern-day United States, the Roman educational system was in place for centuries and had gained a lot of political and social power even with the inherent social inequalities it presented and created. Augustine knew he couldn't just throw the whole system out, that was implausible and simply wouldn't happen. Too many people had been classically educated, like himself, and forgetting that education wasn't really possible. So he had to find another way out, which he found in repurposing those lessons to fit the new goal of praising the Lord and spreading the gospel. If he could find the good things in this past system, because surely there were good things if good people did appear and find God after being educated, he could turn the focus to that instead of the harmful and bad messaging that the rest of the system pushed. Augustine doesn't call, at least at this moment in his life, for mass educational overhaul but instead for educational reform and rethinking. He does not want to completely throw out the old system, but instead steal pieces to

reuse in the newer system.

## **Conclusion**

And aren't these points I've pulled out from Augustine the very points I made in Chapter 1? Constructivist ideas like the students teaching themselves internally and not through direct instruction, discovery learning, or mere behavioral training not being sufficient for proper learning are the answers I saw as being best supported by the available evidence. That the old system was based on behaviorism, and hence missed out on certain conceptual understandings and also on some aspects of caring about the whole learner as a person. Augustine, in his own time, presented the idea that learning is meant to center the learner and their own way of understanding, and that allowed the learner to center God better. Forcing them to do it one way or another did not foster the proper environment for learning. But he also notes and outlines a way to approach reforming the old system without a complete educational overhaul because he, like us, did not have the resources available to do so.

Using his outlined ideas, I see a potential path forward. I, as an educator, don't have to throw out the whole curriculum or lesson plans that have already been made and implemented. That's a waste of work and resources the educational system can't afford to lose. I just need to augment them so they better suit a constructivist teaching style instead of the current one. Change days spent reciting poems or reading out loud to days with peer-led discussions about the text. Replace reading quizzes with small group discussions where students help fill the others in on what they maybe didn't get to read or didn't understand. Implement tutoring programs where I specifically offer one-on-one help to my students to catch them up on the specific deficits they have, perhaps by offering them a quiz at the beginning of the year to note where they feel strong or weaker on certain concepts and skills. Change the focus from behavior-based assessments to

conceptual-based and procedural understanding-based assessments like group work or kids having the opportunity to teach their class on topics. Focus not on mass overhaul because that's too large of a goal for too immediate of an issue, and instead do the most good with the resources I have currently available. Make the best of a bad situation for right now, because while dreaming of fixing the whole system is important, there are kids right now who are currently a year behind where they need to be and that needs to be addressed in the current moment. I refuse to fail the children of our future more than they have already been, especially those who are the most at risk. I will do my best to make their future, our future, the best it can be.



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