

The Moral Politics of Authoritarian Practice in a Post-Truth era: Unpacking family in early childhood social studies policy

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Abstract

This study examines the ideological reshaping of early childhood education standards, focusing on how the concept of family is constructed and governed within state social studies curricula. Critical discourse analysis within a case study methodology reveals how official knowledge is strategically reordered to serve emerging authoritarian nationalist agendas fused with neoliberal managerial logics. This process narrows discursive possibilities, enforcing a moral and social order that restricts pluralism and critical inquiry. The study highlights education's role as a contested site where competing visions of identity, knowledge, and democracy are materially enacted and politically contested.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education, curriculum, neoliberalism

Introduction

Something is happening in Florida that cannot be dismissed as a passing controversy. It is not merely a new chapter in a long-standing culture war; it is a structural reconstitution of what constitutes legitimate knowledge in the early years of schooling. This is not a cyclical shift; it is a strategic reordering. Far from neutral or benign, official knowledge is being reconstructed to serve the imperatives of a newly emboldened Right (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025). This formation does not simply abandon neoliberalism, but mutates it, merging its managerial logics with a muscular authoritarian nationalism. A more dangerous synthesis emerges, invoking the vocabulary of tradition and parental rights while enforcing a singular moral order from above.

This paper examines how such political and ideological shifts are materially encoded in the social studies standards of kindergarten classrooms in Florida and New York. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2024) and case study methodology (Stake, 2010), it investigates how the concept of family is discursively constructed, authorized, delimited,

and policed in the official state social studies standards. The juxtaposition of two states, one widely read as liberal (New York) and the other as ideologically far-right state (Florida), offers a revealing lens into how hegemonic power blocs shape knowledge in regionally specific ways. In Florida, we are witnessing a purposeful narrowing of the discursive field. The very category of family is no longer a space for critical reflection, cultural multiplicity, or democratic engagement. It is instead recast as a stable, ahistorical, and heteronormative institution, an anchor for patriotic and moral instruction. Removed from its complex lived realities, family becomes a site for the state's projection of order, discipline, and hierarchy. The standard is not just pedagogical; it is ideological. It tells children who they are and who they are allowed to be. Contrast this with New York, where social studies standards still reflect a contradictory but more pluralistic orientation. Family is framed here as diverse, situated, and evolving. It includes multiple forms, biological, chosen, transnational, queer, and multigenerational. And while this is not free of its contradictions (such as the implicit neoliberal framing of tolerance and multiculturalism as individual

dispositions rather than structural commitments), it offers a broader terrain of possibility. New York's standards are no utopia, but they still leave space for what Apple (2014) has long described as the "democratic curriculum": a space of contradiction, struggle, and collective meaning-making.

We must ask: Whose knowledge is legitimated in these documents? Whose experiences are recognized? Whose are erased? The contrast between Florida and New York is not simply one of regional preference. It is a conflict over the purposes of schooling itself, whether education will function as a site of critical inquiry and democratic formation or as an instrument of ideological state apparatuses. In Florida, we see the intensification of what Glasius (2023) terms authoritarian practices: the calculated restriction of critique, the narrowing of curriculum review to ideologically loyal actors, and the silencing of dissent through policy and public discourse (Michal Luna & Castner, 2023). This is not accidental. It is part of a broader political project that positions the child as a symbol and a subject of state power. In this configuration, the kindergarten classroom becomes less of a place of inquiry and more of a normalization site. This paper addresses two central research questions:

1. How is the concept of family constructed in the kindergarten social studies standards of Florida and New York, and what ideological commitments underlie these constructions?
2. How do authoritarian practices in Florida's curriculum evaluation and standard-setting processes function to restrict knowledge, eliminate pluralism, and reorient early childhood education toward state-sanctioned norms?

These questions are not academic in the narrow sense. They speak to the heart of what schooling is for. In times of political retrenchment, early childhood education is too often treated as a neutral or apolitical zone. However, this is precisely where ideological work is most effective: hidden beneath the language of standards, routines, and developmental appropriateness. To engage with these texts critically is to engage in what Apple (2014) called the "work of interruption," revealing the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape curriculum and resisting the creeping closure of educational possibility. Such interruption becomes necessary and urgent as we stand at the edge of a new educational order, increasingly intolerant of complexity, multiplicity, and dissent.

The U.S. Educational System and State-Based Standards

The educational system in the United States is decentralized. Unlike many countries where national curricula dictate standards, the U.S. leaves developing and enforcing K-12 educational standards to individual states (Hursh, 2007). This approach reflects the country's federalist structure, where states have significant autonomy over schooling policies, curricula, and assessment frameworks (Ravitch, 2010). As a result, educational standards, including those governing early childhood education and kindergarten expectations, vary considerably across states. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), introduced in 2010, represented an effort to unify academic standards in mathematics and English language arts across participating states. However, many states have since distanced themselves from Common Core, critiquing it for federal overreach and lack of local control (Porter, 2019).

Importantly, while the Common Core targeted core academic subjects, social studies standards were never nationalized, remaining under state jurisdiction. This divergence highlights how ideological perspectives at the state level shape the content and framing of education, especially subjects intersecting with social identity, civic values, and cultural norms.

From Neoliberal Democracy to Authoritarianism: Implications for Family and Education

Recent political shifts in the United States reflect a broader global trend away from neoliberal democratic governance toward authoritarian tendencies, especially in cultural and educational policies (Brown, 2019). An emphasis on market logic, individualism, and limited government intervention characterizes neoliberalism. Arguably, neoliberal ideology initially coexisted with democratic ideals such as pluralism and civil liberties. However, the rise of authoritarian populism challenges these principles, promoting a more centralized control of knowledge, identity, and social norms. This shift is deeply intertwined with changing conceptions of the family, which become sites of ideological contestation.

The definition of family under authoritarian-leaning regimes tends to revert to a more traditional, heteronormative model, often privileging far-right values and marginalizing non-normative family structures. In educational policy, this ideological shift manifests in laws and regulations emphasizing "parental rights" as a form of social control over curriculum and school culture. For instance, the Florida "Parental Rights in Education" bill, often dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law, restricts discussions of sexual orientation and gender

identity in early education settings, explicitly privileging parental authority to dictate what children learn about family diversity (Florida Senate, 2022). This policy is emblematic of a broader far-right resurgence, which advocates for increased parental control over school curricula as a reaction against perceived liberal indoctrination. These developments illustrate how authoritarian impulses in education work to police family definitions and limit exposure to pluralistic understandings, reinforcing ideological divides within society.

Neoliberalism's Definition of Family Versus Pluralistic Understandings

Neoliberalism's influence extends beyond governance to conceptualizations of family, often framing the family unit within market-based and individualistic logics. Friedrich Hayek, a key neoliberal theorist, emphasized minimal state intervention and championed individual liberty, translating into a vision of the *family* as a self-regulating economic unit responsible for socializing children in line with market values (Hayek, 1944). This view promotes a narrow, often nuclear family ideal that aligns with capitalist productivity and personal responsibility, reducing family relations to functional and economic terms. In contrast, pluralistic definitions of family recognize diverse family forms, such as single-parent families, LGBTQ+ families, extended kin networks, and chosen families, and emphasize relational, cultural, and affective dimensions over purely economic or normative criteria. Such definitions highlight the variability and fluidity of family structures across cultural and social contexts, aligning with democratic ideals of inclusion and equity (Jones, 2025). The tension between neoliberal family definitions and pluralistic perspectives reveals

underlying ideological conflicts that permeate education, where the state's endorsement of particular family norms through standards and curricula can either marginalize or validate diverse family realities.

Ideological Constructions of Family in State Standards: Evidence of Culture Wars in Education

Comparing how family is constructed within kindergarten and early childhood education standards across states provides insight into the ongoing culture wars that educators and children confront. In far-right states like Florida, family is typically defined in narrowly traditional terms within education standards, reflecting and reinforcing the political climate's emphasis on heteronormativity and parental control (Florida Department of Education, 2023). Florida's recent demographic and political shifts, becoming a stronghold for Republican policies (Pew Research Center, 2022), are mirrored in educational policies that foreground a singular family model and restrict discussions on gender and sexuality in early grades.

Conversely, more liberal states such as New York adopt standards that explicitly recognize family diversity, incorporating multiple family structures and promoting inclusivity in early childhood education (New York State Education Department, 2023). New York's political landscape, characterized by a progressive electorate (Pew Research Center, 2022), supports educational policies that align with pluralistic and democratic ideals, fostering environments that acknowledge and celebrate diverse family forms.

These divergent constructions within state standards demonstrate how early childhood education is a frontline arena in the culture wars, conflicts over social values, identity, and power permeating American society (Giroux & DiMaggio, 2024). Teachers in states with conservative or far-right family definitions may face restrictions on pedagogical approaches and curriculum content, while children from non-normative backgrounds may experience marginalization or invisibility (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016). These tensions underscore the importance of critically examining the ideological underpinnings of kindergarten standards to understand how broader political and cultural dynamics impact educational experience and socialization.

Theoretical Framework

By examining the ideological contestation between neoliberal individualism and authoritarian conservatism, alongside pluralistic democratic ideals, this framework elucidates the role of education in reproducing or challenging societal norms about family and identity. Informed by Foucauldian notions of power/knowledge, this framework views educational standards as instruments of governance that regulate knowledge, social norms, and identities (Foucault, 1977). The rise of parental rights movements and legislation such as the Florida bill exemplifies how power is negotiated between state, family, and school actors, often at the expense of inclusivity and pluralism. By juxtaposing state standards from ideologically opposed contexts (e.g., Florida vs. New York), the framework allows for comparative analysis that reveals how macro-political trends and culture wars manifest in micro-level educational settings, influencing

curriculum content, teacher autonomy, and child identity formation.

Methodology

I This study uses a comparative case study approach (Stake, 2010) grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Gee, 2024) to investigate how the concept of family is constructed within kindergarten social studies standards in the states of Florida and New York. The research design is informed by an interpretivist epistemology and a critical theoretical lens, focusing on how curriculum documents reflect and reproduce ideological commitments.

The two states were intentionally selected to capture clear ideological contrasts in educational policy and governance. Florida represents an increasingly authoritarian, far-right policy orientation, exemplified by state legislation that restricts curricular content, such as the Parental Rights in Education Act (“Don’t Say Gay”). New York, by contrast, maintains a pluralist-progressive framework, emphasizing cultural diversity and identity formation. This contrast allows for a focused, ideologically informed comparison of how family is represented in foundational educational texts during early childhood. While the core case analysis is limited to Florida and New York, this methodology was developed in parallel with a broader discourse analysis of nine U.S. states to ensure that the comparative insights are within national curricular patterns. This broader data context helped identify dominant and divergent early childhood social studies education trends.

Data Collection

The primary sources for analysis are the official kindergarten social studies standards

published by the Florida Department of Education (2023) and the New York State Education Department (2023). These standards are publicly available documents that articulate the learning goals, values, and civic orientations expected of early learners in each state. The focus is on standards that explicitly or implicitly reference “family,” “identity,” “community,” and “civic participation.” These are key curricular sites where ideological commitments about culture, citizenship, and belonging are embedded and communicated.

Analytical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

This analysis follows Gee’s (2024) critical discourse framework for examining language in educational materials, specifically focusing on four key areas: significance, practices, identities, and relationships. These dimensions provide a systematic means of unpacking how ideologies are embedded in curriculum texts, shaping children’s understandings of themselves, their families, and their societal roles.

1. Significance attributes value and importance to particular knowledge, traditions, or narratives. This analytical dimension reveals how states construct what is worth knowing and remembering, what counts as “core” knowledge for young learners, and what is minimized or excluded. It also interrogates how family-related knowledge is celebrated as diverse, evolving, or reduced to nationalistic symbols and fixed moral lessons.

2. Practices examine the social and civic behaviors that the standards promote.

3. Identities examine how the curriculum constructs or obscures different racial, cultural, familial, and national identities.

4. Relationships explore how the standards construct relationships between individuals, families, and state institutions.

Coding Strategy and Data Analysis

Following Gee's discourse framework, a multi-stage coding process (Saldaña, 2021) was employed. The first cycle involved descriptive and process coding to identify recurring references to family, identity, history, civic practices, and national values. In the second cycle, pattern coding was used to group data into thematic constructs aligned with Gee's four discourse domains. A third round of values coding was conducted to identify underlying ideological values such as pluralism, nationalism, traditionalism, and democracy. This form of coding is useful in curriculum analysis, where ideological positions are not always explicit but are deeply embedded in how content is framed and ordered. Throughout the process, codes were memoed and triangulated with policy discourse and public statements from state leaders and advocacy groups, ensuring alignment between the standards language and broader educational politics.

Findings

When comparing and contrasting the Florida and New York Social Studies standards for Kindergarten, particularly in relation to the concept of "family," we can observe how each state emphasizes the development of children's understanding of family through different educational goals and frameworks. Below is a

detailed breakdown focusing on key points related to family and how it is introduced to young learners.

Family as a Site of Cultural Identity and Pluralism

In New York's Kindergarten social studies framework, family is situated within the domain of *Individual development and cultural identity*, a discursive move that positions the child not as a future citizen to be molded but as a cultural being already embedded within networks of identity, difference, and social meaning.

K.1: Individual Development and Cultural Identity

K.1: Children's sense of self is shaped by experiences that are unique to them and their families, and by common experiences shared by a community or nation.

K.1a: A sense of self is developed through physical and cultural characteristics and through the development of personal likes, dislikes, talents, and skills.

K.1b: Personal experiences shape our sense of self and help us understand our likes, dislikes, talents, and skills, as well as our connections to others.

Standards K.1 and K.2 explicitly encourage children to explore how their families shape their sense of self. Diversity is not an add-on; it is foundational. Students are invited to see that while every family is unique, they also share common cultural universals, values, care structures, rituals, that bind them to others across social and ethnic lines.

K.2: Family and Community

K.2: Children, families, and communities exhibit cultural similarities and differences.

K.2a: Each person is unique but also shares common characteristics with other family, school, and community members.

K.2b: Unique family activities and traditions are important parts of an individual's culture and sense of self.

K.2c: Children and families from different cultures all share some common characteristics, but also have specific differences that make them unique.

The standards explicitly recognize cultural variation and thereby model a curricular logic of inclusion. In this framework, the family is not a fixed or singular form; it is a pluralized and context-dependent institution that reflects the complexity of lived experience. This construction aligns with broader progressive ideological commitments: emphasizing cultural awareness, recognition of multiple identities, and nurturing democratic dispositions through exposure to complexity and difference. The underlying pedagogical message is one of civic humanism: that to understand the self, one must encounter the other. Children are not just learning about "families." They learn how power, culture, and community shape identity, belonging, and justice.

Family as a Pillar of Tradition and Civic Order

Florida's Kindergarten social studies standards construct family through a markedly different lens that privileges historical continuity, civic order, and national unity. The

standard SS.K.A.2.1 calls on students to compare families "then and now," centering the family within a temporal frame that foregrounds change, but only in service of emphasizing continuity and traditional roles. The emphasis is on what has stayed the same and what should remain.

SS.K.A.2.1 – Historical

Understanding of Family: This benchmark encourages students to examine how family life has changed over time, including aspects such as transportation, communication, home life, school life, and recreation.

Elsewhere, family is tethered to civic responsibilities and national rituals. Standards such as SS.K.A.2.2 and SS.K.CG.2.1 make clear that families are not primarily cultural spaces of identity, but units of social discipline and patriotic reproduction.

SS.K.A.2.2 – Family and

Celebrations: Recognize the importance of celebrations and national holidays as a way of remembering and honoring people, events, and our nation's ethnic heritage.

SS.K.CG.2.1 – Civic and Social

Roles: This benchmark highlights the role of families in civic participation, where children learn the responsibilities of being part of their family, school, and community, focusing on duties to promote safety and welfare.

Family celebrations are filtered through a lens of national holidays, Independence Day, and Thanksgiving, where the family is a conduit for state-sanctioned memory and loyalty. The heterogeneity of family life is replaced by a singular vision: American, nuclear, obedient, and proud. What is absent here is telling. There

is no serious engagement with cultural difference, no acknowledgment of non-traditional families, queer families, migrant families, or the fractured social realities that many children inhabit. Instead, the curriculum silently enacts a politics of erasure, removing complexity in favor of a monolithic ideal. This is not a neutral omission; it is a form of curricular violence. The ideological commitments are clear: traditionalism, nationalism, and social conformity. The family becomes the idealized unit of national cohesion, a bulwark against pluralism. The past is not explored to encourage historical thinking but deployed as a moralizing mirror to reinforce what is deemed proper.

The analysis reveals a cultural emphasis difference between New York and Florida's kindergarten social studies standards. New York's framework highlights understanding families through the lens of cultural identity, recognizing the diversity of family structures and traditions. In contrast, Florida's standards emphasize historical comparison, and the civic roles families fulfill within society. Florida frames families more as participants in societal functions, such as national holidays and civic duties, while New York presents families as foundational to personal identity and community connections.

Regarding the family's role in personal identity, New York explicitly links family experiences to individual development, focusing on how family shapes children's likes, dislikes, and cultural traits (K.1). Florida's approach, however, centers on the family's historical and societal functions, including how family life has changed over time (SS.K.A.2.1) and family involvement in national celebrations (SS.K.A.2.2). Both states acknowledge the importance of teaching civic responsibility, but their approaches differ in emphasis. Florida integrates civic roles into family education,

highlighting individual contributions to community welfare (SS.K.CG.2.1). New York emphasizes the personal and cultural growth fostered by family experiences (K.1b, K.2), focusing less on civic participation. Finally, Florida incorporates a historical perspective, encouraging children to compare family life across time (SS.K.A.2.1). New York centers on cultivating personal cultural identity and a sense of community belonging in the present, without the same historical comparison.

Next is a comparative chart that outlines how Florida and New York's Kindergarten Social Studies Standards approach the concept of family, emphasizing their focus, themes, and key standards.

Aspect	Florida Standards	New York Standards
Focus	Historical understanding of family structures over time and comparing past and present family life.	Understanding family to personal identity, cultural diversity, and shared community experiences.
Key Theme	Historical comparisons of family life: past vs. present.	Cultural diversity and commonalities in family life across different communities and cultures.
Main Standard	SS.K.A.2.1 Compare children and families of today with those in the past.	K.1a Children's sense of self is shaped by experiences unique to them and their families.
Family in Historical Context	Emphasis on then and now comparisons: transportation, communication, home life, work, and play (SS.K.A.2.1).	Focus on self-identity shaped by unique family experiences, exploring how children's families influence their personal likes, dislikes, and talents (K.1a).
Cultural Diversity	Less focus on diverse family structures across cultures, more on periods (past vs. present).	Focus on diversity of family structures, emphasizing unique family traditions and cultural practices (K.2b, K.2c).

Cultural Universals	Indirectly acknowledges cultural universals by comparing family life across periods, but not across cultures.	Direct focus on universal family characteristics (K.2a): children's connection to others through shared family experiences, despite cultural differences.
Role of Family in Society	Family is a constant institution with changing roles over time (historical comparison of family roles).	Family is a foundation for individual cultural identity and societal belonging, focusing on emotional and social bonds.
Key Standard for Family	SS.K.A.2.1: Compare children and families of today with those in the past.	K.2b: Unique family activities and traditions are essential to an individual's culture and sense of self.
Cultural Sensitivity	Family is explored more through historical change, focusing on common holidays nationally (K-J.2, K-J.3).	Family is recognized as part of a larger cultural identity, highlighting how traditions differ but are universally shared (K.2c).
Symbols and Traditions	Family holidays are tied to national heritage and public holidays (e.g., Independence Day, Memorial Day).	Family traditions are highlighted as integral to a child's cultural identity (K.2b).

New York and Florida's Kindergarten Social Studies standards offer rich opportunities for children to explore the "family," but they approach it from different perspectives. New York focuses more on personal identity and cultural diversity, encouraging children to recognize their family's uniqueness and connection to community identity. Florida, in contrast, emphasizes historical changes in family life and civic participation, teaching children how families contribute to national and community life. Both approaches provide valuable frameworks for understanding the role of families, but they prioritize different aspects of family life.

Discussion

The contrasting ways Florida and New York approach teaching about family in Kindergarten Social Studies standards reflect broader ideological commitments embedded in educational policy. These differences are not merely curricular but reveal deeply rooted perspectives on identity, culture, and the role of public education in shaping civic understanding. These divergent frameworks, traditionalist and nationalistic on one hand, progressive and multicultural on the other, map onto larger political narratives and pedagogical philosophies. A discussion follows that explores these orientations through the lens of cultural universals and ideological design to examine how teachers can navigate state social studies standards and work to co-construct children's early understandings of family, identity, and belonging.

Framing Family as a Cultural Universal: Contrasting Ideological and Pedagogical Orientations

A comparative examination of Florida and New York's Kindergarten Social Studies standards reveals fundamentally different approaches to how young learners are introduced to family—approaches that align with broader ideological and educational traditions. Florida's standards foreground historical continuity and civic responsibility, framing the family primarily as a stable institution that persists across time and contributes to national cohesion. Children are prompted to compare family life in the past and present (SS.K.A.2.1), understand the family's role in national celebrations (SS.K.A.2.2), and explore responsibilities within a civic context (SS.K.CG.2.1). This framework implicitly positions family as a foundational social unit

within a larger narrative of American tradition and unity.

By contrast, New York's standards position family within a cultural framework emphasizing identity formation and diversity. The standards encourage children to develop a sense of self through personal and familial experiences (K.1), while also recognizing both the uniqueness and commonalities of family life across cultures (K.2). In this model, family is understood less as a civic or historical fixture and more as a cultural system shaping children's understanding of themselves and others. This aligns with a more progressive pedagogical orientation that values inclusivity, multicultural awareness, and the development of a global perspective.

These divergent frameworks reflect and reinforce the pedagogical insights regarding children's capacity to understand cultural universals. As Alleman et al. (2007) argue, children can recognize universal concepts such as family, customs, and social roles while interpreting them through their cultural experiences. New York's emphasis on cultural diversity and family identity mirrors this view. Standards like K.2c and K.2b explicitly highlight the coexistence of shared cultural elements and distinct traditions, fostering a nuanced understanding of commonality and difference. While less focused on diversity, Florida's standards engage with cultural universals more implicitly through historical comparison. By inviting students to examine the evolution of family life over time, Florida promotes understanding of family as a constant across periods, echoing Brophy and Alleman's (2006) argument that children benefit from recognizing universal social structures varying in expression across societies and eras. This approach cultivates cultural continuity and societal

stability, reinforcing family as a central, enduring institution.

New York and Florida offer ideologically distinct pathways for engaging young learners with family as a cultural universal. New York's standards emphasize diversity and identity formation within a pluralistic framework, while Florida's standards underscore tradition and civic responsibility within a historical-national narrative. Both reflect theoretical perspectives on children's understanding of culture and identity, showing how curricular standards serve educational and broader social and political purposes.

Ideological Foundations of State Curriculum Approaches

In examining the ideological architecture of state-mandated curriculum, Florida's Kindergarten Social Studies standards reveal a commitment to cultural politics steeped in traditionalism and historical continuity. This is not merely curricular; it is a political act. The framework privileges family as a stable, near-sacrosanct institution enduring across generations, with superficial transformations. Historical comparison is deployed pedagogically and as a mechanism to naturalize specific social arrangements. By inviting students to contrast family life "then and now," the curriculum inscribes family within a narrative of unbroken cultural transmission, asserting foundational family values remain intact despite modern flux. Using national holidays as central themes reinforces this orientation. Family is tethered directly to the nation, aligning early social understandings with soft nationalism, shaping identity around patriotic sentiment and collective memory. Curriculum becomes a site for producing a vision of American life valuing unity over pluralism, stability over flux, and tradition over difference. The standards' lack of

engagement with cultural diversity is not an oversight but an ideological choice, revealing a shared-values narrative that bolsters a homogenous national identity.

Contrast this with New York's Kindergarten standards, where the ideological terrain differs. The Standards do not universalize family through shared past but diversify its meanings through lived present experiences. The child is not a passive inheritor of traditions but an active participant in constructing identity via cultural interaction and personal history—the standards foreground difference, not as a threat to unity but as the condition for democratic belonging. Family is presented as culturally specific; so is the child. Traditions, languages, and practices are dynamic elements of a pluralistic society, not artifacts of an idealized past. Curriculum cultivates cultural literacy, empathy, and critical awareness. Students explore their backgrounds while respectfully engaging others, transforming how we imagine community and belonging. New York's standards view the classroom as a microcosm of multicultural democracy, actively opposing exclusionary narratives. Through this ideological lens, two competing visions emerge: one preserves a coherent national mythos through tradition and unity; the other constructs a more inclusive, responsive, critically engaged civic identity.

Aspect	Florida	New York
Ideological Leaning	Far-right, traditional, and nationalistic	Progressive, inclusive, and multicultural
Focus	Stability, continuity, and shared national identity	Cultural diversity, self-identity, and shared humanity

Family as a Social Institution	Family as a constant, time-honored structure	Family as diverse and shaped by cultural identity
Emphasis on Diversity	Limited emphasis on diversity; national unity focus	Strong emphasis on recognizing and celebrating diversity
Cultural Sensitivity	National holidays and symbols are central	Diverse family structures and traditions are explored
Historical vs. Cultural Focus	More historical (past vs. present comparisons)	More cultural (recognizing diverse family structures)
Goal of Curriculum	Promote traditional values, social cohesion, and patriotism	Promote global citizenship, cultural awareness, and inclusivity

Neoliberalism, Authoritarianism, and the Transformation of Family in Early Education

The comparative analysis of Florida and New York's Kindergarten Social Studies standards reveals a profound ideological divide in how the concept of family is framed, reflecting broader shifts in democratic governance under neoliberalism. Florida's emphasis on historical continuity and civic responsibility positions the family as a stable institution integral to national identity. Conversely, New York's focus on cultural diversity and identity formation presents the family as a dynamic, culturally specific unit. These divergent approaches illustrate differing educational philosophies and align with neoliberalism's impact on democracy.

Hayek's neoliberal philosophy, especially in *The Road to Serfdom*, argues that traditional institutions like the family are essential for social order and individual freedom. Hayek (1944) claims central planning and state intervention undermine these institutions, leading to tyranny. The family is a stabilizing force, upholding moral values and societal norms. Florida's curriculum,

emphasizing historical family structures and civic duties, aligns with Hayek's view by portraying family as a timeless institution supporting national cohesion and responsibility. Brown (2023) argues neoliberalism reconfigures individuals as "human capital," prioritizing self-investment and market values over civic engagement. This shift is evident in Florida's standards, which reflect neoliberal rationality prioritizing stability and conformity over diversity and democratic deliberation.

In contrast, New York's curriculum, emphasizing cultural diversity and identity, challenges neoliberal and authoritarian narratives by recognizing multiple family forms. This aligns with critical pedagogy, empowering students to question dominant ideologies and engage diverse perspectives. Michael-Luna and Castner (2025) note that neoliberal reforms are worsened by authoritarian practices repressing accountability and freedom of expression.

Implications for Teachers: Navigating Standards in an Ideological Terrain

For teachers, especially those working with young children, implementing state standards is far more than procedural; it is an act of political and moral positioning. As Apple (2013) argues, curriculum is never neutral; it is cultural politics, often serving dominant ideological interests under the guise of common sense or academic rigor. The contrasting family frameworks in Florida and New York's Kindergarten Social Studies standards present educators with different content and visions of childhood, citizenship, and society. Understanding these standards as ideological texts, rather than neutral guides, requires educators to move beyond compliance and engage critically and reflectively.

Teachers must first learn to read standards as political documents: asking what they say, why, who they serve, and what citizens they aim to shape. For example, Florida's standards tying family to national holidays and civic duties (SS.K.A.2.2, SS.K.CG.2.1) might seem innocuous or celebratory. However, scholars like Brown (2023) suggest that this political discourse naturalizes a narrow family-centric version that privileges sameness, nostalgia, and a homogenized national identity. Educators must decode this discourse and ask: What is missing? Who is excluded? What values are promoted, and whose values are they?

At the same time, many teachers may find themselves caught between personal and professional values, shaped by commitments to inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and social justice, and the moral stance embedded within state-mandated standards. This is especially acute in politically far-right environments, where educators may feel pressure to enact a curriculum that contradicts their training or personal ethics. In such contexts, teachers must carefully consider how they position themselves: as neutral facilitators, critical interveners, silent dissenters, or ethical disruptors.

To do this meaningfully, teachers should engage in a practice of critical self-interrogation. They might begin with reflective questions such as:

- What are my personal beliefs about family, culture, and citizenship?
- How do these beliefs align or conflict with the standards I am expected to teach?
- What does it mean to teach standards that may marginalize the children in my classroom?

- How can I honor the standards' intent while expanding their scope to be more inclusive, honest, and reflective of real-world diversity?
- What does resistance look like in the context of early childhood education, and what are the risks and responsibilities that come with it?

Teachers must also reflect on where the profession stands with these issues. Are we, as a field, committed to equity and the affirmation of all children's identities? Or are we adhering to increasingly narrow and ideologically rigid visions of education? Recognizing that teaching is never apolitical, educators must be equipped to act as ethical interpreters of policy, rather than passive executors.

Practically, this might mean supplementing mandated content with stories and examples reflecting diverse family structures, cultural practices, and historical perspectives. It could mean facilitating conversations, encouraging empathy, curiosity, and respect for difference, even when standards are silent on such values. It could also involve collaborating with families to ensure their realities are reflected in the curriculum and classroom discourse.

In this way, teachers can embody the standards while reinterpreting their meaning, leveraging what is present and critically attending to what is absent. This does not require open defiance, but courage, professional judgment, and moral clarity. As Brown (2023) reminds us, neoliberalism and authoritarianism narrow the space for democratic engagement and moral plurality. Teachers remain among the last defenses against this erosion, especially in early education. Their classrooms are among the few public spaces where new imaginaries of

belonging, identity, and justice can still take root.

Teaching *family* is not simply about describing who lives in a household or what holidays are celebrated; it is about framing children's earliest understandings of who they are, who belongs, and what kind of world is possible. Therefore, not only teachers but teacher educators, researchers, and all early childhood professionals and advocates must take up this work not just as technicians of curriculum but as stewards of democracy.

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