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Rhetoric and the purposes of public education: building discourse for shared responsibility

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we employ discourse analysis of US gubernatorial political advertisements to analyze the discursive struggles over the purposes of public schools. The advertisements are analyzed to demonstrate how rhetoric works to shape consent for dominant, human capital views regarding schooling's purposes, as well as to communicate alternative articulations of schooling's purposes which can disrupt that consent. In the latter exploration, we draw upon the approach of public persuasion, where the public is persuaded to deem something other than dominant economic values as relevant for making education decisions. We analyze alternative contextual cues that can shift citizens' impressions, leading them to weigh conflicting values toward schools differently. We offer narratives that change the meaning citizens make of schools with the aim of building public support for public schools.

KEYWORDS

Discourse analysis; education rhetoric; educational politics; public persuasion; democratic imagination

Introduction

The dominance of economic and free market metaphors in education discourse is now pervasive in societies embracing neoliberal approaches to schooling (Carr, 2008; Labaree, 2018; Levinson, 2011; Meens & Howe, 2015; Sant, 2019; Sung, 2010). Consider 'school choice'. This tidy phrase, ubiquitous in the United States and elsewhere, indicates a scenario where parents can choose among a wide selection of high quality schools made affordable by tax credits, vouchers, or government funding which assist parents in paying tuition for private schools using taxpayer funds (Boulton & Coldron, 1996; Erickson, 2011; Gordon & Whitty, 1997). The opportunities implied in this phrase make it remarkably compelling for governments and organizations advancing capitalist values for education (Meens, 2016).

A similar metaphor with a longstanding history is that of schooling-as-supermarket (Knight Abowitz & Stitzlein, 2018; Labaree, 2007; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain, 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (p. 5). Here, the supermarket metaphor draws upon the familiar experience of going to the local grocery store stocked with competitively priced products from which to choose and encourages us to think of our access

to schools similarly. Such metaphors have shaped the imagination of many policymakers and parents. The supermarket metaphor focuses on one aspect of schooling provision, depicting families as competing for educational goods and choosing those that best suit their desires. It simultaneously hides 'other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor' (p. 10). In this case, the metaphor conceals alternative understandings of school provision, such as assuming collective responsibility for funding and enabling schools for all children. Thus, schooling-as-supermarket helps advance and justify the diminishing responsibility that many citizens take for the wellbeing of their public schools. Educational discourses are forms of rhetoric with agency. Metaphors, for example, are 'capable of giving us a new understanding of our experience' (p. 22). Educational metaphors can, over time, reorganize our understandings of schooling and its purpose. [Metaphors] 'can give new meaning to our pasts, to our daily activity, and to what we know and believe' (p. 139). A staple of education discourse in the US and around the world for several decades, free market metaphors are ubiquitous in this era as the human capital purposes of education have accelerated with globalization (Becker, 2006; Bloch, Kennedy, & Lightfoot, 2006). Our example here of the supermarket metaphor is typical in that it works *with* the interests and policies of school privatizers rather than neutrally describing or reflecting those interests and policies (Erickson, 2011). Metaphors used to talk about schools are important because they do not reflect as much as shape common-sense thinking about what schools are and are for, and in this way, produce hegemony, or the dominance of one perspective, which influences policy preferences and voting decisions, and thus produces real political outcomes.

Free market and human capital discourses of education have proven powerful across time (Labaree, 2007; Meens, 2016; Sant, 2019), but as the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggests, there are discursive struggles over conflicting meanings in social-political communications about education and schooling. Our analysis here seeks to understand how education and schooling discourses set up a powerfully simplistic and sympathetic framework for certain value orientations toward educational policy, while also considering how alternative discourses challenge the human capital hegemony.

These alternative discourses show the extent to which discursive meanings can shift, subject to pluralistic political imaginaries and possibilities. Political theorist Yaron Ezrahi's (2012) work analyzes the creative powers of the democratic political imagination, arguing that a democratic regime, like any other, 'must be imagined and performed by multiple agencies in order to exist' (p. 1). We contend that economic and market metaphors of schooling, following Ezrahi's thinking, are 'political imaginaries', or 'fictions, metaphors, ideas, images, or conceptions that acquire the power to regulate and shape political behavior and institutions' (p. 3). Metaphors, then, are discursive articulations which 'become powerful tools that, when performed, can produce social and political facts' (p. 38). For example, narratives of natural rights, where rankings of people devolved from natural law rather than from man himself, were used within some societies to categorize primitive or savage people as worthy of enslavement and to justify enfranchising only men, because women were envisioned merely as reproducers rather than political agents (p. 68). Natural rights were more than political fictions; they shaped practices, beliefs, and laws.

A compelling snapshot of present education discourse in the US is found in the advertising texts created for the Wisconsin 2018 gubernatorial race, which pitted conservative

Republican incumbent Scott Walker against the State Superintendent of Public Education and Democratic candidate, Tony Evers. Within the US federal system, governors are state executives who can set education spending priorities in the budget and influence, approve, or veto educational legislation in the state. A discourse analysis of these advertisements reveals how economic narratives strongly shaped messages from the conservative candidate, and egalitarian narratives shaped the liberal candidate's statements about education. Walker's rhetoric emphasized economic aims and embodied theories of human capital in two ways: in the purposes of education (to make young people employable) and in the fiscally responsible burdens the savvy taxpayer should shoulder for the costs of public education (Becker, 2006; Brown, Cheung, & Lauder, 2015; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007; Schultz, 1961). Evers' message, from his then-position as a lifelong public educator and overseer of state curricular and pedagogical guidelines, centered on children and youth, while also seeking to question Walker's record as a pro-education candidate. That Evers eked out a victory in the race shows that the hegemonic economic discourse might be successfully challenged toward a more robust sense of citizen responsibility, pushing policy towards a more fully inclusive public system featuring more holistic philosophies of education.

Our analysis of the Walker-Evers campaigns' use of educational rhetoric is followed by an assessment of potential alternatives to the economic framings of education. We aim to illuminate metaphors and stories that might more effectively attract public attention, build public support for public schools, and counter problematic narratives that are increasingly being used to dismantle public education support in some parts of the US.

Methodology and methods

To analyze educational discourse employed in the Walker-Evers gubernatorial race, we employ the methodology of discourse analysis, which 'aims at the deconstruction of the structures that we take for granted; it tries to show that the given organization of the world is the result of political processes with social consequences' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 48). In the poststructural tradition of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we seek to understand how educational realities are constructed as objective, natural, common sense. Laclau and Mouffe draw on Gramsci's (2011) theory of hegemony as a fundamental construct illustrating the manufacturing of consent, which is powerfully present yet 'pierced by contingency', and never 'fully fixed' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 110–111).

Discourse, in this theory, is comprised of signs and signifiers which attempt to close and fix meanings. Through the practice of articulation, or acts of linguistic expression, speakers articulate signifiers constituting 'nodal points which partially fix meanings' in the field of discursivity (p. 113). Our earlier discussion here of 'choice' is an example of one such nodal point in educational discourse. By examining the practices of articulation in a high-stakes state election around schooling policy and values, we can gain insight into both the hegemonic meanings of schooling's human capital purposes as well as the challenges offered up in counterhegemonic articulations. This portrait of hegemonic struggle offers us a sample of how new articulations of schooling's purpose and values might be challenged towards the agenda of more democratic educational imaginaries.

Counter-hegemonic discourses are, indeed, more than imaginaries. Articulations in service of public schooling's more egalitarian and holistic purposes, as opposed to the

hegemonic articulations of human capital and economic nationalism, can be productively considered through the specter of issue-framing theory in political science (Supovitz & Reinkordt, 2017; Woodly, 2018). Deva Woodly draws upon the approach of ‘public persuasion’ in her study of the increasing US public support for gay marriage policies despite continued reluctance of many citizens to embrace the morality of homosexuality (2018, p. 23). Woodly studied the public discourse of an era in which activists –

... inserted several resonant, conflict-displacing frames into public discourse, which allowed members of the polity to consider the issue of spousal rights from a new perspective, one that emphasized the values of marriage, family, and equality rather than gender or sexuality norms. (p. 22)

Woodly explains how speakers can ‘expand the range of ways’ to ‘interpret what is at stake in political debates and shift attention to new bases for decision-making’ by inserting new ways of framing a problem or position (p. 24). In so doing, speakers can alter the public meaning of a concept or policy. Woodly argues that this explains public expansion of gay marriage support during the marriage equality movement era from 1994 to 2014 in the US.

Like Woodly, we recognize that citizens’ values are multidimensional and that they may hold multiple and conflicting views regarding education at any one time. In addition to neoliberal values portrayed through economic narratives around schools, many citizens also hold other values about schooling. When the public is persuaded to deem something other than dominant economic values as relevant for making policy decisions about schooling, different preferences and greater actions in support of public education may result (Woodly, 2018). This requires counter hegemonic articulations which can provide new contextual cues that change how citizens see schools, reframing the issue so they come to weigh conflicting values toward public schools differently. Following the analysis of the political advertisements in the Wisconsin gubernatorial race, we offer reframing possibilities along these lines.

In short, we use discourse analysis and issue framing theories to illuminate the discursive struggles over educational values as seen in political advertisements in a highly contested governor’s race, contrasting these articulations with alternatives that highlight more egalitarian and holistic education views. It is important to add that we do not seek to make citizens blind cheerleaders of all public schools no matter their quality or value to the families they serve. Instead, we explore articulations and discursive constructs which can re-ignite the sense of shared responsibility citizens feel for the educational success of all children in their community. Our project seeks new possibilities for language and imagery that open new ways for the public to engage with and participate in our schools, including new ways to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens to public education (Stitzlein, 2017).

Our methods for the analysis entailed analyzing political advertisements, identifying key articulations and central nodal points of meaning in order to trace discursive logics at work in the conveyance of meanings in the advertisements, as we interpreted the advertisements in the context of US political, educational, and cultural histories. We selected political advertisements as data sources, discovered through video searches on YouTube channels employing search terms such as ‘schools’ and ‘school choice’, as well as ‘schools and elections’, during the fall 2018 mid-term campaign season. We

sought popular texts produced for mass audiences. Via this sampling we located short video advertisements designed for television and Internet from the Wisconsin 2018 gubernatorial race. We focus here on three campaign advertisements used in the race, chosen based on the criteria that each spoke directly to the candidate's own values, beliefs, or policies about education (as opposed to the candidate speaking against the positions or views of his opponent) (Evers, 2018a; Walker, 2018a, 2018b). Examining a prominent governor's race, and the ways this race conveyed partisan framings of education reform, provides a useful window into how school rhetoric is constructed using visual and verbal symbols in a contested election. We believe these examples to be indicative of larger trends in the rhetoric about education and its purposes.

Results

Economic competitiveness versus kids first

Walker: 'together we can keep Wisconsin working for generations to come'

As a two-term Governor, Scott Walker had built a clear record related to primary, secondary, and higher education, and both advertisements attempted to shine the best possible light on it. The first advertisement examined is called 'We're just getting started' (Walker, 2018b). This advertisement features upbeat music and a casually-dressed Walker talking to the camera about Wisconsin's progress, focusing on students and family-based issues. 'Wisconsin is on a roll: lower taxes, more money in education, and record unemployment.' The words lower taxes, money in education, and record unemployment are on the screen as he provides this narration. He goes on to tell the viewer that

our plan reduces student loan debt for students who work in high demand careers here in Wisconsin; makes youth apprenticeship programs available to 7th and 8th graders [adolescents]; helps senior citizens stay in their homes, makes it easier for working families to afford child care.

The video concludes with Walker stating: 'Together we can keep Wisconsin working for generations to come.'

The second Walker advertisement, called 'Teach our kids', tells the story of one rural Wisconsin community (Walker, 2018a). The advertisement opens with upbeat music and a sign that says 'Welcome to Three Lakes', with bright sunshine in the background. Walker's voice tells us that 'Three Lakes is a small town doing some pretty big things'. This is the story of one town's school reform related to 'Fab Labs', or fabrication labs which are computer-controlled machine laboratories associated with maker culture and 3-D printing. We hear from a school board member, telling us that Three Lakes has been 'rethinking how we teach our kids', and then from a special education teacher, Fab Lab instructor, and high school student, all of whom tell the story of how the Governor has helped them become a leader in the technical education field.

One need not know what a 'Fab Lab' is to know that it's a high-tech innovation that presumably helps students get jobs; images show students working on or near computers in a lab setting. The Fab Lab instructor tells us that the lab teaches students 'how to think critically and solve problems using hands on experiences instead of lectures and tests'. The student, working in the lab, tells us he has learned 'the kinds of skills employers are looking for'. The school board member states that they are now training other

school districts to start their own Fab Labs. The special education teacher tells us that ‘Our district is over 300 square miles and the Governor’s funding for rural schools has really helped with transportation costs’. Walker comes onto the screen in the final seconds to say that ‘Wisconsin is a national leader in Fab Labs in public schools, so small towns like Three Lakes can keep their graduates close to home’. On the screen flashes a headline from 2016: ‘Wisconsin leads in Tech Ed’.

Each Walker advertisement communicates tight linkages between schools, education, and the economy, but in different ways. The first advertisement, ‘We’re just getting started’, flashes on the screen a list of education and human services accomplishments that highlights creation of youth apprenticeships, student debt relief for select careers, and a tax credit for child care costs. In the first moments of the video, however, the major claim of the advertisement is communicated in three important ideas both verbally stated and in print on screen: ‘lower taxes, more money in education, and record unemployment’. Walker’s advertisement related to education and human services begins by reminding viewers that their taxes have been lowered in combination with low unemployment, and backs this up by stating policies he has advanced that further link education with perceptions of economic prosperity, like apprenticeships and student debt relief. The final tagline of the ad sums it up: ‘Together we can keep Wisconsin working for generations to come’.

In the second advertisement, ‘good education’ is that which is tightly tied to employability and low costs for citizens is advanced through the single story of Three Lakes. Without knowing what a ‘Fab Lab’ is, the viewer of this video can easily see that Walker is associated with bringing fresh ideas to school districts that do not cost a lot of money but better help kids ‘think critically’ and ‘gain skills employers are looking for in the job market’, and aid in keeping kids in Wisconsin after graduation. Again, education is discussed solely by its economic contributions. The advertisement offers an articulation of three intertwined values often touted by conservative politicians in contemporary U.S. educational politics: (1) the return-on-investment argument of human capital theory; (2) local control versus ‘big government’ bureaucracy, as one school district, electing to make this innovation, is now teaching other districts how to get these labs started; and (3), fiscal efficiency (cost of only \$200 per pupil for this new Fab Lab). The tag line in this video is, ‘The governor’s commitment to funding education has made Three Lakes a stronger community’.

‘Commitment to funding education’ will likely not be Walker’s gubernatorial legacy. In 2011, during his first term, Walker cut \$900 million from the public education budget (Conniff, 2011), achieved in part through Act 10, a bill which eliminated most collective bargaining rights for public employees, including educators (Madland & Rowell, 2017). He survived a recall effort in 2011–2012 after massive protests against Act 10. In his 2017 budget, Walker boosted spending for public education by \$636 million, more actual dollars in public education spending than any budget in the state’s history (Walker, 2017).

Among his political funders have been ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), a group which has successfully promotes conservative, pro-business education legislation across the states, as well as the free-market powerhouse lobbyists of the Koch Brothers, Americans for Posterity and other pro-business lobbying groups (Center for Media and Democracy, 2018). As Governor, Walker had several major conservative victories over

collective bargaining rights for state unions, cutting state agency funding, expanding gun rights laws, and curtailing abortion rights. In education, he supported voucher programs to fund private (including religious) schools, charter schools, and has also cut funding in higher education, sought to weaken tenure, and tried to orient higher education more towards workforce needs. As one progressive reporter summed up in 2011, 'Wisconsin is on the leading edge of a national assault on public education' (Conniff, 2011, para 6).

What these two Walker videos emphasize, then, are his conservative credentials and messaging with regards to education policies. Interestingly here, his education advertisements do not tout his policies which seek to privatize public education (expansion of vouchers) but highlight those which seek to tightly link public education to human capital purposes. As a fiscal conservative, Walker's message relates to his push to make education less expensive (particularly as it relates to funding for government-sponsored public schools and teacher salaries) and to tightly link public education's outcomes with economic gains for all of Wisconsin's citizens. He combines this message with an emphasis on 'rethinking' education and technologies that help prepare students with skills valuable in the workforce.

The hegemony of human capital discourse in education is continuous over time, even if it is incomplete and persistently challenged, as we will later illustrate. Fesmire (2016) notes the prevalence of this discourse, where 'the principal aim of education [is] to provide a padded yoke for the state's workforce so that students may be trained and productively driven down preexisting vocational rows' (p. 54):

Educational politics in the United States is entangled in the notion that the foremost mission of education is, in the infamous words of Gov. Scott Walker's proposed revision of the University of Wisconsin's mission, 'to develop human resources to meet the state's workforce needs'. This general outlook is not an outlier. It is typical of those who approach education primarily as a way to fuel industry with skilled labor. (p. 53)

Many in the US have a mostly 'unexamined' acceptance of this linkage between economic aims and schooling (p. 54). Persistent narrative and rhetorical strategies employed by politicians like Walker are one reason why our common sense thinking about educational purpose is often silently accepted by parents who, if questioned, would likely never reduce their child's educational experience to the single purpose of employability. Discursive articulations such as those in Walker's advertisements help promote and keep in place the historically resonant frames of education for economic purposes above all else. In the case of Walker's advertisements, particularly 'Teach our kids', this industrial frame gains updated, digital energy through high-tech labs which teach 'the skills employers are looking for'.

Evers: 'putting kids first'

Next, we examine an advertisement run by Walker's challenger, one which illustrates Evers' education message. Evers' campaign website states that 'I'm running for governor because I believe what's best for our kids is what's best for our state' (Tony Evers for Wisconsin, 2018). Elected Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2009, Evers had spent his professional career in public education. As the challenger, Evers' campaign articulations on education and all other issues are aimed to distinguish him from the incumbent's record. This is particularly true in the realm of public education policy,

where his education advertisements critique Walker's record on school funding. The message that Evers' uses to contrast with Walker on education is 'what's best for kids', with a particular emphasis on *all* kids, signaling inclusion across social class and cultural difference.

In the video entitled 'Every Kid', Evers the educator is targeting Walker's record. As context, Walker declared himself an 'educator governor' in June 2018 (Bauer, 2018). Evers' articulations in his political advertisements take persistent aim at that claim. Evers' video, 'Every Kid', begins with a photo of Walker sitting with young children in a classroom setting. The narrator asks us, 'Do you trust Scott Walker on education?' (with same text at bottom of screen). 'He's the politician who cut \$800 million from our schools', says the narrator, who then states, 'It's time for new leadership'. With a shift in the music to an upbeat tune, the narrator introduces us to Tony Evers, State Superintendent of Public Schools, sitting at a desk with a US flag behind him. We learn of Evers' results in this role: raising graduation rates to nearly 90%, and advancing career and technical training. We see Evers talking to factory workers, to people in board meetings, and diverse students. We are told that Evers is a 'former teacher who will put our kids first'. We are also told, in slightly covert terms, that Evers will address the persistent inequities that plague public education along social class (among other) lines: 'As governor he'll make sure every kid has a great public school, regardless of their zip code'.

This video, in the context of an educator running against a conservative Republican governor, tells a simple story that Evers, as a former teacher and state superintendent, will put 'kids first'. The evidence for this claim, beyond Evers' own identity and experience as an educator, are mundane and vague statements: graduation rates and 'advancing career and technical training'. Evers talks to many diverse people in the video – multi-ethnic groups of children, workers, and people in board rooms. But the narrative of the video is 'new leadership, putting kids first'. The message implies a moral commitment to children. This forward-directed commitment is supposed to stand in contrast to Walker's record and his cuts to education budgets. It is delivered based on the credibility of Evers as career educator in Wisconsin schools. Yet the evidence for this commitment, or what it means, is undescribed in this 30 second video.

As a counter-hegemonic text, it signals a distinct positionality – articulating inclusion, signifying differences of social class and racial-ethnic identities using visual and verbal cues. This inclusive vision of education, however, contains articulations of submission and alignment with the human capital discourse so prevalent in education, with Evers' record of career and technical education expansion noted prominently. The counter-hegemony in this advertisement is represented by *who* is deserving of high quality education, but it does not signal any key differences in the *what* – the types and purposes of education in which all children actually deserve to be included.

Discussion

Counter-hegemonic possibilities for reimagining public education

These videos are drawn from a specific location and time period, yet the articulations they create and recirculate have broader resonance. Walker airs advertisements which reinforce a very powerful framing of educational purposes: economic opportunity for

students, and cost-efficiency as a primary value in educational spending. ‘Framing works by “telling people how to weight the often conflicting considerations that enter into everyday political deliberations, [changing] the perceived relevance of alternative considerations”’ (Nelson et al., in Woodly, 2018, p. 23). Viewers who see Walker’s ‘Three Lakes’ advertisement have, of course, multidimensional value preferences when it comes to public education. In addition to economic opportunity, parents tend to support educational values such as a strong teaching force, education for good character, and for engaged citizenship (Hart Research Associates, 2017; RealChoices.Org, 2018). But the frame of ‘education is for creating a strong workforce’ pushes the economic value of education into the forefront of value choices, and its redundancy across US cultural and political discourse helps make it even more powerful.

Evers’ campaign offers up a moral alternative to this frame, a counter-hegemonic articulation calling upon values with some sharp distinctions to Walker’s advertisements. ‘Kids first’, displays values of inclusiveness, equality and compassion for all children, demonstrating a challenge to the instrumental, human capital values for education seen in Walker’s advertisement. ‘Kids first’ is a floating signifier in education discourse, powerful as much for what it says as what it fails to state clearly, a bold and simplistic proclamation of value priorities for education policy-making. Evers’ advertisements spend less time providing evidence of what that framing means than in attacking the record of his opponent. Viewers of these videos might interpret the ‘kids first’ frame as strongly associated with ‘adequate educational spending for all children’ in light of incumbent Walker’s drastic cuts to education in his time as governor. While this interpretation would not be factually incorrect, as a counter-hegemonic move against neoliberal education discourse, it is not necessarily a potent re-articulation of educational purpose, in the sense of lacking widespread clarity and appeal for many citizens. As Woodly (2018) argues, ‘frames do important work at the level of political culture as well as at the level of the individual mind’ (p. 23).

What frames can serve counter-hegemonic purposes in education today? We explore other examples of counter-hegemonic alternatives to neoliberal, human capital-oriented frames. We do so in the spirit of Ezrahi’s (2012) claim that democracies must be continually re-imagined in order to exist; that the times we are currently in ‘open paths to a more conscious and pressing search for and experimentation with new political imaginaries of agency and community’ (p. 301). Importantly, for US public education – with a mixed history of success in realizing democratic ideals for all students and families – new or refreshed democratic imaginaries promote not simply a defense of the institution but the energies required to continually reinvent it. ‘The dual capacity of the imagination to represent and reinvent’ (p. 15) is a critical, normative element in extending our analysis towards public education’s future. We do not ascribe to value neutrality but seek to change the public meaning and discourse around the struggles and future of public education so that the political stakes are reframed. Our aim is to explore counter-hegemonic framings that trigger citizens to pivot away from their emphasis on economic narratives by placing greater weight on political and moral frames for schooling instead.

Political framings

‘We the people’ – the bold script that opens a fundamental US national document – presents a compelling political framework for igniting democratic imaginings. The

Constitution outlines the freedoms that may be accessed or enhanced through economic means, such as the sort of freedoms enabled by one's employability and adept use of technology in the workplace, which were featured in some of the advertisements analyzed. The Constitution also addresses the political responsibilities of citizens. Indeed, the Constitution itself resulted from the efforts of founders to put forward a new system of government upon resigning from their former one. 'We the people' suggests a solidarity, as well as collective responsibility to self-government and to strengthening our democratic systems and opportunities for future generations. The idea of collective responsibility goes well beyond the sort of future supported by fiscal responsibility and worker preparation, values seemingly solidified as facts necessary for the future in the Walker advertisements. And it goes beyond Evers' questions about whether the governor can be trusted to fund and protect public education – it pushes citizens to consider how we should shoulder that responsibility.

'We the people' invokes not only a shared responsibility, but a shared fate, where all are interconnected and where we rise and fall together (Ben-Porath, 2013). 'We the people' urges us to interpret our experiences by considering how they mutually impact us. Sharing a fate goes beyond merely having a common fate and seeing that fate as dictated by one's employability. Instead, it entails a more active role in shaping the future and preserving the well-being of our country and its citizens, thereby nurturing the relational aspects of citizenship and our responsibilities to each other. It builds an inclination to care for others throughout our country, even though they may differ from us, because we recognize the many ways in which our futures are bound together politically, geographically, economically, and culturally, and that each of those domains can be improved by cooperating together (Stitzlein, 2019).

While widely recognized as phraseology from founding US documents, 'we the people' can be used to expose the unfinished task of delivering a quality education to all citizens – to all of us. 'We the people' connotes power and possibility that arises through collective action and empowered citizens. It opens up new spaces for action within and around our traditional public schools, rather than the giving up and turning away from public schools, which is so often embodied in privatization policies. Figuring out what 'we the people' desire in our schools and how to achieve it also invites deliberation and participation.

The need for well-educated and active citizens is especially noteworthy in our current environment, where some citizens around the world feel drawn to authoritarian alternatives to democracy (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Such a counter-hegemonic articulation may be particularly salient right now for longtime advocates of democracy and active citizenship who sense a worrisome slide, and for those caught up in the trend.

Moral framings

A moral framing may also help motivate citizens to pivot from a hyperfocus on economic values. One powerful framework is 'the promise of public education'. This articulation has two significant potential meanings. On one hand, 'the promise' invokes a pledge that has been often made to establish free, equitable, and quality education for all. This promise has never been fully achieved in the US, but rather only has been achieved for some children in dominant classes and racial groups. Education discourse constructed around 'the promise of education' might emphasize the unjust treatment of some children and the

inequitable education provided to them, thereby overtly playing upon indignation regarding these unfulfilled moral commitments. Such a promise requires follow through and ongoing attention for fulfillment. On the other hand, ‘the promise’ is understood as opportunity. This is a future-directed vision of the promise of tomorrow that opens up because of education, unleashing new pathways, possibilities, and outcomes. ‘The promise of public education’ invokes a sense of forward-driven responsibility, and actions that should be undertaken alongside and, in some cases, on behalf of others, including marginalized populations. ‘The promise of public education’ holds open hopes for something new and better, while also achieving a goal central to US democratic identity.

‘The promise of education’ has been powerfully articulated by the Partnership for the Future of Learning (2017) – a collaboration of teachers’ unions, social justice groups, and public education advocacy and policy organizations. Their video by this name is a more extended and successful version of Evers’ ‘kids first’ message. It triggers moral commitments that may trump purely self-interested economic concerns and lead to policy actions on behalf of schools. Within the video, citizens are called out for emphasizing economic and data concerns, like rankings and competition, rather than equal opportunity. It shows how communities have invoked economic actions by shutting down, consolidating, and privatizing schools, thereby ‘abandoning those who need the most support’. Queuing such moral concern, the advertisement shifts to ways that we can better support schools, reminding viewers that ‘a promise is a promise’, and urging citizens to act on behalf of our kids, our community, our country, and our democracy. Reworking a key word from the economic lexicon toward a moral commitment to inclusiveness, it urges citizens to ‘invest’ in our public schools and suggests such investment is not merely monetary.

A variant of the ‘promise of education’ is its negative inverse: the failed promise, in particular to those communities where social class, racial, and ethnic make-up of families correlates with lack of educational opportunities and poor outcomes. This metaphor asserts that schooling is a moral good all children deserve (not just our own), and puts its delivery squarely on our shoulders, claiming ‘when a school fails, it’s because we have failed’. While much talk in recent decades has been focused on failing schools, teachers, and administrators, this metaphor redirects attention to our moral failings. Schneider (2018) uses this metaphor in a compelling statement regarding the supposed overall failure of our schools:

Instead of telling a largely untrue story about a system in decline – a story that absolves us of any personal responsibility – we might begin telling a different story: about a system that works. It works to deliver a high-quality education to those we collectively embrace. And it works in a different way for those we have collectively refused. When a school fails, it is because we have failed. (para. 14)

The shortfalls of school funding, facilities, performance, and more reveal the ‘limit of our embrace’, exposing who we care for and who we do not when it comes to educational policy and structures. As a result of this reframing, the problems of our schools fall on our shoulders and we cannot be absolved of them by focusing on economic narratives, or applauding the economic implications of successful Fab Labs.

Discourse constructed around the explanation that ‘when a school fails, it is because we have failed’ might demonstrate that when we say every child deserves a good education, we explicitly value all children regardless of their demographics. Unlike Walker,

who features almost exclusively white people in the advertisements we analyzed, Evers' advertisement prompts the viewer to recognize his commitment to children from diverse groups by showing him working with students and adults from various racial and ethnic groups, which often map onto socioeconomic status diversity.

Discursive articulations calling attention to those left behind when families flee to private or charter alternatives, and which showcase the effected populations, evoke an imperative. Shifting attention away from the narrow economic interests of one's own family, these articulations expose the moral shortcomings of such values. They suggest, instead, that we should choose equity, for given that schools have long been doling out private rewards through educational experiences that vary according to the socio-economic status of the children that compose them, they effectively perpetuate inequalities of the past by sustaining winners and losers. Popular metaphors associated with school choice, such as the supermarket discussed earlier, tend to imply that we ought to be putting our own children ahead of all others. While some would argue this is 'natural' for parents to do, metaphors working in the interest of privatization tend to encourage this self-serving perspective rather than provide citizens with a wider, more inclusive framework highlighting which children and families tend to matter most in educational policymaking.

Conclusion

Political talk matters; it shapes not only what we value, but how we act when it comes to our support for and criticisms of public schools. Much political talk, including campaign advertisements, emphasizes economic aims of schooling and is conveyed through economic metaphors that shape how we conceive of our educational world and define our reality. Aligned with Woody's account of public persuasion, we have offered alternative discourse that might reframe the stakes by prioritizing moral and political responsibilities, thereby de-emphasizing dominant economic goals that have led many citizens to endorse school privatization either directly or indirectly through the candidates they endorse. Such a shift is significant, because it may reshape the policy preferences of citizens, leading to impact that is far more substantial than just words. The alternatives we sketched here might lead citizens to emphasize political and moral values over economic ones, so that we are able to widen our embrace and support public schools in ways that bring about more equitable structures as well as equipped and active citizens.

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