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Knowledge to Action: A Communication and Framing Issue

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Background and Framework
How can we transform the power of knowledge into political will, engaging practice, and responsive policy? Education scholars[i] increasingly believe public engagement is the answer (Oakes, 2016; also, see Sparks, 2015). Yet, there is no clear, best approach. Should scholars work directly with policymakers, advocate for a particular cause, or educate the wider audience? Whatever the answer, scholars must maintain their impartiality as well as the public's trust (Bleich, Blendon, & Adams, 2007; Rabinovich, Morton, & Birney, 2012).

Perhaps public engagement ought to revolve less around outright persuasion and advocacy and more on teaching, sharing, and discussing (Fiske and Dupree, 2014). For education reform, this means helping people recognize the following: 1) that many factors affect students' outcomes, not just teaching and schooling; 2) that solutions require a nuanced and comprehensive approach, rather than "silver bullets;" and 3) that leveling the playing field sometimes requires additional resources for certain students and communities.

Using *communication frames* and *framing* may broaden the public perspective. This involves highlighting certain aspects of an issue that resonate with the intended audience (Entman, 1993). *Frames* specifically refer to the actual words, images, phrases, and presentation styles people use to communicate a message (Druckman, 2001; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; 1989; Goffman, 1974). For instance, science communication scholars might frame the issue of climate change as an "economic development opportunity" that would create green jobs. How about framing environmental protection in terms of "maintaining the purity and sanctity of nature"? Such frames appeared to expand people's support (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Nordhaus & Schellenberger, 2007).

The key to effective framing, however, is to consider the worldviews of a given audience, which relates to their core values (Kahan, 2010; Nisbet, 2005; Shen & Edwards, 2005). In the previous environmental protection example, "purity" and "sanctity" speak to the moral values that largely resonate among conservatives. It is possible that a religious frame (i.e., one that emphasizes serving God by protecting His creation) will mean more to evangelical Christians. Regardless of which frame is used, the scholarly consensus remains the same—that humankind must take steps to preserve their environment. The only thing that changes is *how* scholars communicate.

Significance and Purpose
As such, good communication may bridge the knowledge-action gap, at least in part. If education scholars can integrate values-based frames and framing as an essential part of their research communication, then people may begin to think more constructively about education issues. This change would serve as a first step, by stimulating political will toward the scholarly consensus. In this paper, I explore ways to "frame" education issues from a research communication standpoint. I also offer several considerations for education scholars when communicating their work.

<u>Methodological Approach</u>
To decide what frames are appropriate, I looked for core cultural values that represented U.S. Americans. The seminal work of Williams (1951) and Steele and Redding (1962) offers a list from which to springboard from. By cross-referencing them with those from more contemporary experts (e.g., Kohl, 1984; Baker; 2014), I found several overlapping values, including popularly recognized archetypes like *individualism*, *equality*, *patriotism*, and *achievement*/*success* (see Table 1). This partial list offers a starting point to organize scholars' communication.[ii]

<u>Discussion: Exploring Values-based Frames for Education</u>
So, how can scholars use cultural values to help people see education issues more productively? They might consider framing education and inequality in terms of: 1) future preparation; 2) investing in our children; 3) opportunity for all; and 4) social stability and civic function. Let's explore each one in more detail.

Frame #1: Future Preparation. America's distinct emphasis on *achievement* and *success*, combined with their thirst for *progress* and their inherent *pride* in all things American, suggest that the "future preparation" frame may push people to think more collectively about the well being of all communities, including those with less resources. This frame, which connotes changing landscapes, new challenges, and appropriate skills, may also offer a more optimistic perspective on reform (Bales, 2010; Manuel, 2010). Furthermore, it will likely expand the public mindset beyond local actors (i.e., parents, teachers, and students) and emphasize collaboration among a wide range of institutional actors (e.g., community and business leaders). Bales provides an example of how to describe the "future preparation" frame:

> When we think about our country's future, we need to consider how we can do more to prepare our population to meet future challenges. While we will continue to need the basics, we will also need to add new skills and to update our education system so that it prepares all Americans for the challenges of the 21st century. When we don't prepare for new challenges, our education system isn't working the way it should to maintain and advance our country's quality of life. We could improve our country's prospects for the future if we used our education system to prepare for life and work in the 21st century. (p. 19)

Frame #2: Investing in Our Children. When polled on topics of national priority, three-quarters of Americans surveyed want policies that improve children's lives, a topic that rated higher than jobs and the economy, pursuing terrorists, and reducing the federal deficit (Child and Family Policy Center and Every Child Matters Education Fund, 2015). The visceral pull of children's wellbeing appears to be a universal (rather than merely American) value that may preempt individualist and defensive modes of thinking as well as broaden support for comprehensive inequality solutions. This suggests that scholars ought to keep an open mind when it comes to thinking about cultural values—*children* was not a "value" that showed up in the literature on core American values.

Yet "investing in our children" may be effective because it relates to other American values—that of *practicality, efficiency, productivity*, and *nationalism*. Framing inequality as a national productivity and economic efficiency issue—as opposed to a moral one (which may turn off those who see education in consumerist ways)—helps Americans see the practical value of prekindergarten education (Heckman, 2011; Heckman and Mosso, 2014). For every initial dollar invested, prevention policies can generate 7 to 10 cents per year (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Kirp, 2011; RAND, 2005; Temple & Reynolds, 2007), making it a compelling argument for both sides of the political spectrum. Support for preschool investment in the U.S. continues to rise, increasing 12 percent in the 2015-2016 fiscal year over 2014-2015 spending levels (Education Commission of the States, 2016). This includes significant investments by 32 states, 22 of which have Republican governors.

Frame #3: Opportunity for All. Americans value the idea that no one person is better than another and that everyone, if given the opportunity, can succeed. Polls consistently show they support "equal opportunity" (see Gallup, 2011; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011); yet, how communicators present it matters. Framing inequality in terms of race, income, or some other special interest pits groups against each other in a fight for limited resources (Davey, 2009; FrameWorks Institute; 2010). This leads to zero sum thinking where one group has to move down for another to go up. Situating the issue of fairness not in persons, but in places or systems, however, improved support for redistributive policy—i.e., distributing programs and services equitably across all communities:

> As we go about the work of reforming education, it is important that we recognize that programs and services are not equally distributed across all communities in our country. Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. When some communities are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like a poor educational system. We need to level the playing field so that every community has access to quality schools and colleges. Effective education reforms would allocate societal assets more fairly among communities, whether they are rural or poor, or not. (FrameWorks Institute, 2010, p. 5)

Davey (2009) suggests that a sense of "linked fate" bonds people when education reform is framed in terms of opportunity.

Frame #4: Social Stability and Civic Function. Among those who emphasize traditional values like *family* (such as Latino and Asian cultures, as well as social conservatives), *citizenship*, and *patriotism*, the "social stability and civic function" frame may appeal. This group, who represent a large section of the American public (FrameWorks Institute, 2009), sees the family as the foundation for academic achievement. They also envision schools as crucial partners. Imagine if the context of scholars' writing reflected the following language:

> Families are the foundation of a stable and thriving society. In particular, parents and the community must instill the values, morals, and discipline that are the foundation of success in school and in life. Unfortunately, not every child has access to such

community resources, and schools can only do so much. It is therefore important that society invests in its parents, families, and communities. Working parents, especially those who are single, often work long hours, care for elderly parents, and have household responsibilities on top of caring for their children. As a result, they could use extra help—whether it is tutoring for their children, extracurricular services, or parenting advice. Partnering schools with families and the community they live in will ensure we pass our values, morals, knowledge, and skills to our children. (Eng, in press)

The concept of partnering schools with families and communities has seen growing interest in the form of community schools, which bring principals, teachers, parents, and community-based organizations together (see, for instance, Epstein, 2001, National Education Association, 2011; SEDL & U.S. Department of Education, 2013). With over 5,000 schools in more than 150 communities nationwide and growing (Blank & Villarreal, 2015), community schools appear to be gaining wider support. Framing educational equality as a function of social stability may help change public attitudes and bolster support for community schools.

Implications for Education Researchers / Future considerations
Designing frames will be challenging, because it involves a new mindset focused not only on objective empiricism but also on communication—an area education scholars have not traditionally considered. As such, the following four questions can help scholars plan their communication message, whether in peer review or general audience publications:

1. In what ways can your message reflect the values or worldviews of the larger audience beyond your academic peers? Are there other niche values more appropriate for your particular audience?
2. How can you frame your topic or issue in ways that generate a broader perspective of education and inequality? (For example, can a classroom intervention technique you are evaluating be considered outside the classroom or for *all* students?)
3. How can you encourage readers to think more collectively (beyond individuals), in which our "fates" are bound together as a nation?
4. Does your writing overly focus on the problems and disparities at the expense of practical solutions or recommendations?

At the heart of these questions lay a fundamental idea: to translate knowledge into action, scholars have to first connect with the broader audience. The question remains: *do scholars believe they have a responsibility to lead public opinion toward the scientific consensus*? If so, communication frames and framing, when designed appropriately, is one way to begin.

Scholars may also need to question the prevailing norms and incentives of the academic community (such as basing tenure primarily on peer-reviewed publications). While they tend to foster academic rigor, impartiality, and empiricism—the hallmarks of high quality research— these norms and incentives also discourage scholars from actively participating in the public sphere (Walt, 2011). Their voices give way to more persuasive (and likely biased) ones, including those of politicians and the media. Communication frames and framing therefore give

scholars an avenue to potentially level the playing field. That may go a long way in achieving the promise of equal educational opportunity.

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Table 1. *A Partial List of Most Common Cultural Values in the U.S.*

Value(s)	Description
Individualism	The uniqueness, worth, and autonomy of individuals
Efficiency Productivity Practicality	A respect for time: that it is not wasted; that things should be done for a reason
Equality Equal opportunity	Everyone—regardless of one's station in life—deserves the same chance to succeed; no one is better than another
Patriotism Nationalism Citizenship	Pride in the nation and the desire to perpetuate its exceptionalism; the American Dream
Achievement Success	Striving to do well and be the best
Progress Change	Always striving to improve, never being satisfied; forward-oriented
Activity Work Effort	Americans value work, being engaged, or doing something; aversion to idleness
Science Rationality Truth	Respect for reason and truth rooted in science
Material comfort	Includes not just the basics (nutrition, housing, car) but also recreational (hobbies, etc.)
Freedom Liberty	The right to do what you want (within the law) without persecution; related to individualism
Humanitarianism Generosity	Includes helpfulness and personal kindness, esp. in times of need

Adapted from: Williams (1951); Steele and Redding (1962); Kohls (1984); and Baker (2014)

ⁱ In this article, the term *scholar* includes researchers and social scientists, even though they differ slightly—the former is committed to the rational assessment of ideas whereas the latter two tend to focus on objective empiricism (Vucetich & Nelson, 2010).

ⁱⁱ Methodically establishing a set of core cultural values—if it's even feasible—falls outside the scope of this paper, which is more focused on enumerating some of the most commonly cited values from which we can frame education issues. Other values not in Table 1 (e.g., family, health/fitness, and optimism) may have been cited in the literature but not necessarily as unanimously. Nonetheless, they, along with other universal human values (e.g., the wellbeing of children, eating, and cultural pride), should not be overlooked. Audience segmentation research, such as those by Maibach et al. (2008) may prove useful.