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Education Inequality: Broadening Public Attitudes Through Framing

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Abstract

Research over the last 50 years have been remarkably consistent when it comes to addressing education inequality: background factors like family and socioeconomics matter to school success. Yet policies remain narrowly focused on school-based reforms like testing, standards, and charter schools due in large part to America's limited understanding of education and inequality. I argue that scholars, as the experts, are ultimately responsible for changing how policymakers and the public think about these issues—a duty they have yet to embrace. In this connection, the use of framing can help education researchers broaden attitudes and stimulate political will. Drawing mainly from disciplines outside education, this article explores the potential of framing as a communication tool for education scholars. Specifically, I examine how it has been used in science, political, and marketing communication to broaden public opinion. I also offer ways to frame the issue of education inequality to help the public, including decision makers and influencers, conceive of solutions and opportunities beyond the status quo.

Keywords: framing, education inequality, inequality

Education Inequality: Broadening Public Attitudes Through Framing

Background

50 years ago, a landmark U.S. study of 4,000 schools and 645,000 pupils found that student background factors, such as family characteristics and socioeconomics, mattered more to academic achievement than any school program, facility, or teacher (Coleman, 1966). Popularly known as the Coleman Report, this study indicated the need for a broader conception of reform beyond schooling. Research since then have consistently echoed Coleman's findings (e.g., Dearing et al., 2004; Department of Education, 1994; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Heckman, 2011a; Jencks, 1972; Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2016). To this day, however, policies continue to ignore the wisdom of this research.

One major reason is that Americans have an individualist and local perspective of education. They believe, for instance, that the purpose of schooling is to help individuals develop the tools to succeed (Chart & Kendall-Taylor, 2008), and that parents, students, and/or teachers are responsible for educational outcomes (Bales, 2010). Lack of parental engagement, care, discipline, and other internal characteristics drive educational failure and inequality today, according to the public (see Community in Schools, 2015; FrameWorks Institute, 2009). Such perspectives make it difficult to consider other contributing factors (e.g., curriculum, socioeconomics, community resources, and state legislatures). They also obscure the severity of inequality and therefore preclude productive discourse.

To make matters worse, politicians and the media perpetuate this simplistic perspective. Policymakers during the 1960s, for instance, sought to tackle growing unemployment, underemployment, and poverty as part of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty initiative. They interpreted these issues as largely attributable to individual deficiencies in skill or culture (Moak,

2014; Ruttenberg, 1970; U.S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Employment and Manpower, 1963). Upgrading the education of poor children through compensatory funding would cultivate human capital and reduce inequality, officials believed. This led the Johnson administration to pass the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) in 1965.

The consequences were profound. Not only did the ESEA diminish Coleman's (1966) seminal finding—that outcomes are driven by factors beyond schooling—it also legitimized the idea that schools alone can significantly improve student outcomes. The current accountability movement, including high stakes testing, “no excuses” charter schools, the Common Core State Standards, and even the new Every Student Succeeds Act, continues to focus on school-based interventions to this day.

Similarly, mass media plays a crucial role in perpetuating “silver bullet” solutions (see Hancock, 2011; Maeroff, 1998; O'Neil & Haydon, 2013). Stories highlight, for example, how charismatic leaders like Michelle Rhee reformed failing Washington DC schools by taking on the teachers' union, or how Geoffrey Canada established a culture of success at Harlem Children's Zone in New York City (see Ripley, 2008 and Tough, 2008, respectively). Such media emphasis on individual groups or actions implies that reforms do not require systemic or collaborative undertaking (O'Neil & Haydon, 2013), and that schools can overcome student disadvantage when incentivized. Education as the engine that drives national prosperity is rarely heard, comprising only 2 percent of media content on education reform (Bales, 2010). Not only does this message reflect public attitudes, it also commoditizes schools as market institutions.

To meaningfully address inequality, elected officials and the public need to recognize that education serves a common (and not just individual) purpose—to ensure national prosperity. Widening their perspective will also help them see reforms as practical, rather than political or

ideological. In this way, scholars have the responsibility as experts not only to help people see education and inequality more broadly, but also to lead public opinion toward the scientific consensus. Educating them is only part of the solution.

A Potential Solution: Frames and Framing

One way education scholars can help people think more constructively is to present the issue of inequality more purposefully, through the use of *frames* and *framing*. This involves highlighting certain aspects of an issue in a communication text (Entman, 1993) that can then stimulate productive discourse, political will, and meaningful solutions. *Frames*, in particular, refer to the actual words, images, phrases, and presentation styles people use to communicate a message (Druckman, 2001; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; 1989; Goffman, 1974). As a psychological construct, framing can be traced to the experimental work of Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1984), who examined how different presentations of identical decision-making scenarios influence people's choices and their evaluation of the various options presented to them. From a sociological perspective, Goffman's (1979) research first presented the idea that individuals continually struggle to interpret their life experiences and make sense of the environment around them.

Frames and framing are commonly used in three, often interrelated ways: 1) to decrease bias and build support for an issue; 2) to reduce the complexity or accessibility of an issue; and 3) to establish a narrative or shape discourse. Combined, they can compel people toward change. In this article, I draw from disciplines mainly outside education to explore the potential of *frames* and *framing* as a communication tool for education researchers. Specifically, I examine how they have been used in science, political, and marketing communication to decrease bias, reduce complexity, and/or shape discourse. I also offer ways to frame the issue of education inequality

to help the public conceive of solutions beyond school accountability.

Framing to Decrease Bias and Build Support

Through the use of frames and framing, scholars can recast an issue in more neutral or beneficial ways. For example, manufacturers may label beef products as “75% lean” rather than as “25% fat,” even though both messages suggest the same thing. Yet in studies, consumers significantly preferred the former option since it alleviated their health concerns (Levin & Gaeth, 1988). The dairy industry similarly cast milk as nutritional (i.e., that it provides essential calcium or that it can be low-fat), even as research studies increasingly prove otherwise (e.g., Lanou, Berkow, & Barnard, 2005; Sonnevile et al., 2012). Communicators can cultivate positive attitudes when they emphasize compelling aspects of a given issue.

Even when topics are contentious, frames may help. The term *climate change*, for instance, offends critics less than *global warming*, according to Schuldt, Kornrath, and Schwarz (2011). They believe the latter suggests a “directional prediction” that can be discredited by one cold spell, whereas *climate change* sounds more neutral and can accommodate unusual weather of any kind. The same idea holds for *taxes*. Large portions of the populace dislike paying them, in part because they suggest an additional amount is taken away. In examining participants’ willingness to curb carbon emissions, researchers found that people significantly preferred the term *carbon offset* to *carbon tax* (Hardisty, Johnson, & Weber, 2010). The term *offset* implies a benefit will be gained first (i.e., the reduction of carbon emissions) rather than levied additionally.

What appears to matter are the cues (or signals) embedded in these frames. For example, a pro-environmental message framed in terms of “harm” or “care” sends a very different message than one focused on “purity” or “sanctity.” For liberals predisposed to environmental

concerns, the terms may not matter. For conservatives, however, the latter frame resonates more, according to Feinberg and Willer (2013), because it relates to values they identify with (like religiosity and traditionalism). When “purity” and “sanctity” were tested, conservatives adopted pro-environmental attitudes that were similar to those of their liberal counterparts, in contrast to the harm/care frame.

The issue of same-sex marriage also triggers negative cues when it is framed as “equal rights.” Heterosexuals simply do not see marriage in terms of rights, but rather as a commitment involving love and responsibility (Hatalsky, 2011). As a result, gay rights coalitionists created the *Why Marriage Matters* campaign in 2011, which adopted the values, tone, and language of the majority: “Gay and lesbian couples want to get married to make a lifetime commitment to the person they love and to protect their families” (Why Marriage Matters, 2016). Their website tagline explicitly echoes this shift: “Love. Commitment. Family.” Aligning with the values of those who were opposed or on the fence likely played a significant role in why Maryland and Maine won referendums that year (Ball, 2012; Frank, 2012).

As these examples illustrate, messages that trigger dissonance will unlikely move people. Cues must relate to underlying predispositions to influence opinions. It is therefore vital that scholars consider the values of the intended audience when developing frames (Amodio et al., 2007; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009; Shen & Edwards, 2005). Knowing this, Lackoff (2004, 2006) even suggested that Americans would gladly pay more taxes if it were framed as a patriotic duty or as “citizenship dues.” Implicit in this frame is the idea that the public can contribute to making America exceptional.

Not only do these studies demonstrate the importance of using language consonant with a group’s worldview, it also suggests that multiple frames may be needed. Maibach, Roser-

Renouf, and Leiserowitz (2008) demonstrated that different frames can build support for energy conservation, with each emphasizing a value or priority of the intended audience. A religious frame may appeal to those who want to protect God's creation, whereas an economic frame might tout the money people can save by going green (see Table 1).

Segmenting the audience and emphasizing their values ensure that their perspectives are considered, which is a necessary to reduce existing bias. Politicians and marketers have long used this strategy (referred to as *market segmentation*) to reach subsets of a broad target. Think of the Latino vote, the female vote, and the Evangelical vote during elections. Similarly, various audience segments will view education and inequality differently.

For education, frames and framing may help overcome the “magic bullet” bias, as well as the public's individualist and consumerist values. The key is to help people see education beyond local actors and elements and conceive of it as a collective or systemic undertaking that recognizes the impact of socioeconomics, community resources, and other broad factors. Yet Bales (2010) argues that experts are spending too much of their communication time explaining policy details rather than situating the proposals in common American values.

Framing to Reduce Complexity

In 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—guidelines for what students should know and be able to do by the end of each school year—rolled out. Yet most Americans knew little about it even four years after (Public Mind Poll, 2015; PDK/Gallup, 2014). Public misconceptions were common. For instance, 31 percent of adults surveyed mistakenly believed that the federal Department of Education under the leadership of Barack Obama developed the Common Core (LSU Public Policy Research Lab, 2015). Two-thirds of Americans thought that

it contained at least one of the following topics: sex education, global warming, evolution, and the American Revolution (Public Mind Poll, 2015). In reality, only math and reading are included.

Lack of information and misperceptions likely explains its declining support (Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2015; PDK/Gallup Poll, 2015). Interestingly, however, the public appears to endorse the idea of *common standards*. When the Common Core label was dropped, support for common standards jumped significantly, according to two separate polls (Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2015; LSU Public Policy Lab, 2015). This held true for both Democrats and Republicans surveyed. Had advocates framed the Common Core more clearly, support would be likely higher. Instead, they allowed critics to frame it as “federally-imposed” and as a scripted, one-size-fits-all curriculum—neither of which is true. Bill Gates, one of the major financial backers of the CCSS, acknowledged that developers “did not do enough to explain it early and clearly” (Klein, 2015, p. 12). Common Core needed to be simplified in a way that makes it accessible to a non-academic audience.

One common way is to frame the issue in simple terms or phrases. Republicans, for example, dubbed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act “Obamacare” to imply that the public would lose individual control over their medical care to the federal government under the Obama administration. The emphasis on loss of control (as opposed to affordability) likely explains why the public opposed “Obamacare” more than the “Affordable Care Act” in 2013 (46% compared with 37%) (CNBC, 2013). According to branding expert David Aaker (2013), Democrats lost an opportunity to leverage their legislation name when they allowed opponents to simplify the issue and undermine its support.

As another example, Democrats clarified the looming issue of government debt and insolvency when they framed it as a “government shutdown.” In reality, the law requires non-essential government personnel be furloughed and agency activities and services (e.g., national parks, support for veterans, visas and passports, housing, etc.) be curtailed until Congress agrees on spending levels for the fiscal year. However, the term *government shutdown* pandered to public fears that police, military, schools, hospitals and other essential public services would halt. Democrats were clever to simplify the choice between spending and chaos in influencing public perceptions, according to conservative media writers (e.g., Impomeni, 2011; Pollak, 2015).

When issues are complex, like poverty and inequality, people will typically default to the status quo (Anderson, 2003; Fleming, Thomas, & Dolan, 2010; Schwartz, 2004). Yet frames used in other disciplines can help education scholars consider how to simplify education and inequality in ways that may incite a sense of agency. In this way, solutions will sound more manageable and actionable.

Framing to Establish or Shape Discourse

Finally, framing can be used to establish or constructively shift how people talk about an issue, through narratives that resonate. Researchers at the New Economics Foundation (NEF, 2013) think tank, for example, argued that the “austerity” frame used during the European debt crisis in 2009 was effective because it had a plot, villains and heroes, a moral that was easy to identify, and intrigue (see Figure 1).

Framing the solution to the debt crisis as austerity led the public to believe that “bitter medicine” was essential (see Park, Clery, Curtice, Phillips, & Utting, 2012; Stanley, 2015). This frame dominated the national discourse, embedding itself into the public consciousness. It

supports the research on the power of stories to shape opinions and attitudes (e.g., Stamatakis, McBride, & Brownson, 2010; Steiner, 2007).

Once established, however, a narrative can preclude other interpretations. Consider the examples of immigration and Islam. Media stories typically frame the former as a crisis, a problem, or an illegality that then justifies heightened law enforcement approaches and other punitive measures (Governance Studies Program at the Brookings Institution and the Norman Lear Center, 2008; Lackoff & Ferguson, 2006). Similarly, Islam is portrayed as a problem that needs to be “dealt with.” Politicians and the media, particularly those on the politically conservative spectrum, often paint it as a homogenous/monolithic religion, as inherently violent, as a uniquely sexist religion, and as incapable of rationality and science (Powell, 2011). Rarely do stories paint Islam as a peaceful, moral religion that cares for the wellbeing of humanity. Public discourse needs credible, scholarly voices to promote dialogue, learning, and social connections and as well as balance populist rhetoric.

Research in various fields demonstrates the potential of frames and framing as a promising way for scholars to shape the inequality narrative. After all, data simply cannot compete with frames, especially those used by the media, advocates, and politicians. This may compel scholars to recognize the importance of communication and to consider frames and framing as legitimate tools of communication. Following are multiple framing options that may broaden public understanding and help people see education and inequality differently.

Framing Education Inequality: A Systems Approach

Research suggests Americans recognize the value of collective action, but the deep and dominant patterns of thinking they use to understand their social worlds tend to emphasize the

role of individuals and families in society (FrameWorks Institute, 2009). As such, education scholars ought to embrace their responsibility to widen public understanding of education and inequality. This will require emphasizing *systems*, rather than *people*, in their communication. One way to do this is to develop metaphorical frames, or simplifying models (Auburn, Brown, & Grady, 2006), which prime participants away from individualistic thinking and toward productive discourse. To illustrate, Kendall-Taylor (2009) used an “orchestra” metaphor to demonstrate how different parts of the education system depend on each other:

Our nation's educational system is like an orchestra . . . it has many groups of players with specialized jobs, such as school boards, taxpayers, families, teachers, principals and administrators. The orchestra sounds best when each musician is skilled, the instruments are well tuned, and the sections work together in harmony toward the common goal of playing the best music they can. But a changing America and world have handed the orchestra new music to play, and they haven't gotten in sync yet or rehearsed the new repertoire enough to be ready to perform it. No orchestra becomes great overnight, and the beauty of the music depends on lots of small steps, dedicated practice by musicians who have all the resources they need, and an orchestra conductor who can create harmony among all the parts. (p. 8-9)

The simplifying model of the orchestra inoculates against the unproductive cultural tropes of individual success, which leads to a consumerist, “us-versus-them” mentality. In the end, widening the public lens allows scholars to frame the purposes of education as a public good that improves the health, community, stability, and society’s quality of life. When people see the

system of education and the need to coordinate its different parts, they expand their thinking about how and where reform might take place (Kendall-Taylor, 2009; Manuel 2010).

Which frames will likely broaden public understanding of education and inequality?

Methodologically, I chose themes based on FrameWorks Institute's research on public perception of education (e.g., Bales, 2010; FrameWorks Institute, 2009; and Kendall-Taylor, 2009), which centered on 18 focus groups and 49 in-depth interviews, conducted in 7 cities with diverse groups of politically engaged people around the U.S. Below are four framing themes that, when consistently and widely adopted, may broaden public understanding of education and inequality and facilitate support for broad-based policy action.

Frame #1: Future Preparation

In her analysis of media coverage on education reform, O'Neil (2012) found that talks of problems—i.e., the so-called education crisis—dominate over those of solutions, which contribute to public pessimism, lack of agency, and defensive and consumerist modes of thinking. Focusing on future preparation, which includes changing landscapes, new challenges, and appropriate skills, may offer a more collective and optimistic perspective on reform (Bales, 2010; Manuel, 2010). Such frames expand the public mindset beyond the local actors (i.e., the parents, teachers, and students) and emphasize collaboration among a wide range of institutional actors. Equally as important, they also suggest the need to enhance skills for the traditional curriculum to provide excellent schools, adequate educational resources, and quality educational experiences. 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)

The issue of inequality would likely benefit from the “future preparation” frame, through the idea that unequal resources in some areas undermines the country's future development and quality of life. At the same time, it also facilitates discussions about cultivating critical skills like collaboration and communication—not just the “three R's.” Most importantly, “future preparation” spreads the onus of responsibility beyond schools and families onto private industry, the community, and the government. Surveys indicate that parents, especially those from working and middle class backgrounds, would welcome expanded opportunities (e.g., internships, public-private partnerships, and innovative investments) and resources (e.g., PDK/Gallup, 2013; 2014).

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, reducing the federal deficit, and reducing inequality (Child and Family Policy Center and Every Child Matters Education Fund, 2015). The visceral pull of children's wellbeing appears to be a common value that may preempt individualist and defensive modes of thinking as well as broaden support for comprehensive inequality solutions. Perhaps the most current and

promising evidence of the power of investment is the growing support for federal investment in early childhood education (see Gallup, 2014; First Five Years Fund, 2014).

The work of economist James Heckman and others powerfully illustrates the potential of framing a delicate, potentially polarizing issue of early childhood education in terms of national economic development, prevention, and benefit (see Heckman, 2011b; Heckman & Mosso, 2014). He believed that 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 the public see the practical value of prekindergarten education. 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 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: Social Stability and Civic Function

Among those who emphasize traditional values and family, the social stability and civic function frame may be appealing. 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. Positioning reforms as a way to ensure future social stability and civic-mindedness among society's children would be similar to the same-sex advocates' *Why Marriage Matters* campaign in 2011 that adopted the traditional values, tone, and language of middle Americans. Imagine if the context of scholars' writing reflected the following:

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 even parent training. Partnering schools with families and the community they live in will ensure we pass our values, morals, character, and academics to our children.

The concept of partnering schools with families and communities has seen growing interest in the form of community schools, which partner principals, teachers, parents, and community-based organizations (see Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998; 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. New York City, for one, is seeking to launch and sustain a system of over 100 community schools as a central strategy for achieving an equitable education system (Office of the Mayor et al., 2015). Framing inequality as a function of social and societal instability that erodes civic functions may help change public attitudes and bolster support for community schools.

Frame #4: Opportunity for All

The propensity to talk about inequality in terms of race, income, and special interests narrows the discourse, as researchers have found (e.g., Davey, 2009; FrameWorks Institute; 2010). Such patterns of thinking pit groups against each other in a fight for limited resources and facilitate an “othering” effect that treats non-group members less equally. Talks of reducing gaps, whether achievement or income, feed into the idea that poverty is intractable and that minorities are problematic (FrameWorks Institute, 2010). This leads to zero sum thinking where one group has to move down for another to go up.

Davey (2009) found that equity, or fairness, received less support when framed in terms of people or groups. Situating the issue of fairness not in persons, but in places or systems, however, improved support for redistributive policy (systems thinking, reduce disparities across communities)—i.e., that programs and services are not evenly distributed 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)

People consistently support “equal opportunity” (see Gallup, 2011; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011), yet, how communicators present it matters. If solutions suggest people ought to help others (as the achievement gap and race-based initiatives do), they will receive less support than

those that aim to boost everyone. The latter creates a sense of a “linked fate,” according to Davey (2009), which bonds people. It explains why this issue of *Journal of Social issues* has focused on the theme of “opportunity and mobility” (for all, or at least the majority of Americans), rather than on race and other identity-based themes.

Putting It Together

So how might education scholars construct a coherent message for decision makers and the public? The key is to think about systems in everyday life that require a holistic approach and that resonate with people, such as those involving health/fitness, sports, or even cooking. Here is one example:

Addressing educational inequality is like taking care of your body. Some areas are prone to problems, such as headaches, soreness, or irritations, which may require extra care. Exercise is only one part. Diet, mental discipline, rest, and access to affordable, nutritious foods are equally as important to creating and maintaining a healthy life. Similarly, addressing inequality requires more than school-based reforms. Families, communities, businesses, and the government must work in concert to ensure that all children—no matter what community they live in—have equitable resources and opportunities to gain the skills to thrive. Some of them may require a little extra care than others, just like our own body. Each part is interrelated and, in some cases, requires the help of another. Yet all are important components to developing a stable and moral society of families ready to thrive in the twenty-first century.

The spirit of the language, rather than the exact words, is critical. The point is to emphasize the interrelatedness of elements that contribute to equality (and its solutions), by imbuing “discussions with a tone of collaboration, mutual benefit, and collective good” (Manuel, 2010, p.

5). See how the following frame can also widen the public lens on inequality, using a sports metaphor:

Winning consistently involves teamwork, no matter how many superstars there are. Success depends on team chemistry, its players, the right attitude, great coaching, a guiding team philosophy (or system or culture), and money. Fans know that loading up on talent—at the expense of coaching, role players, or a system—will not necessarily (and will unlikely) result in championships. In the same way, academic success requires more than fixing schools. It requires the collaboration of families, community, businesses, and government, especially when considering that some communities and schools simply have less access to adequate resources, services, or accommodations. In order to foster a learning environment, every member needs to be invested in. Such collaborative spirit will ensure we thrive as a team—or in this case—a nation.

Each of the simplifying models discussed—an orchestra, health, and sports—aims to stimulate broader, systemic thinking among the public, particularly those who influence or make policy.

Implications for Education Researchers

So what exactly do these frames mean for education scholars? What should they do? After all, their specific research papers will focus on topics as narrow as school-based intervention programs and as broad as policy initiatives. Education experts need to consider the broader audience (i.e., the policymakers and the lay public) beyond their professional peers as they write their research. Keeping these topics in mind as they write may collectively alter the way people perceive scholars and their research—which is a fundamental step to moving people.

Frameworks Institute (2009c) suggests that communication lead with a widely held value, followed by an explanation of the issue, and finally a policy solution. While this may not translate into research writing per se, its approach is instructive. Scholars typically define the problem (or issue) during the beginning of the paper, which offers a valuable opportunity to broaden its appeal. If, for example, African American and Latino(a) children are recommended less than their white or Asian counterparts to join academically rigorous academic programs (a problem), then scholars may want to preface their paper with a common value such as *investing in our children* or *future preparation*:

For the U.S. to thrive in the twenty-first century, all children and schools need access to rigorous programs, whether it is STEM, advanced placement, or gifted and talented programs. Unfortunately, not all schools have the appropriate training to develop programs that meet the needs of students from diverse communities, including African-American and Latino(a) children . . .

Again, this prelude is meant to illustrate a broader approach to defining the problem that emphasizes situations (rather than groups), which may prime non-academic readers to support solutions beyond schools. Throughout the paper, the researcher would continually refer to the education system as integrated components:

While *XYZ intervention* demonstrates promise, it is critical that schools work with parents and community-based organizations to leverage its potential. Like an orchestra, each part depends on others create a successful whole . . .

As another example, a research paper documenting achievement gaps could explain it in terms of *fairness between places* (rather than people) where some communities do not have the resources they need to prepare students. It would emphasize that people's fates are linked, and

that many elements—including policy, communities (including businesses), curriculum, and parents—must be involved.

These examples are not meant to dramatically improve inequality in and of themselves, but rather to demonstrate how the collective communication of the academic community toward broadening the public lens on inequality can shift opinions toward the scholarly consensus. As such, the following five questions may help education scholars as they plan and evaluate their papers:

1. Does your paper consider some of the widely held values (such as *opportunity for all*, *social stability*, or *investing in our children*) that resonate with readers?
2. Do you frame your topic in ways that generate broader understanding of education and inequality? (i.e., does it consider other elements beyond the classroom, such as family and community, or at least suggest that other elements play a part?)
3. Does the writing inadvertently facilitate local or individualist patterns of thinking? (i.e., does it elevate students, parents, or teachers as mainly responsible for outcomes over other broader factors?) How have you encouraged readers to think more collectively, in which our “fates” are bound together as a nation?
4. What metaphor(s), or simplifying model(s), can you use to help nonacademic readers understand the issue or solution?
5. Does your writing overly focus on the problems and disparities at the expense of practical solutions or recommendations?

Looking Ahead

Despite fifty years of research suggesting that background factors matter, U.S. leaders have yet to incorporate such findings into its public policy. Individualist and local patterns of thinking continue to inhibit productive discourse and political will for sweeping reforms. This suggests that the issues of education and inequality do not resonate, and that public communication and outreach are critical. However, educating politicians, the media, and the lay public is only the beginning. Communication research demonstrate that the use of frames and framing can shift attitudes and compel people, by decreasing individual and public bias about an issue, reducing its complexity, and establishing a narrative or shaping discourse. If scholarly research is to be considered credible, then framing is a fundamental step to leading public opinion toward the scientific consensus.

Changing the way scholars work, however, is complex. Significant barriers to public engagement exist, including the norms and incentives in academia oriented toward peer, rather than public, scrutiny. Additionally, there are broader individual, organizational, and political forces at the policy end that prevent research uptake. This includes the skills and abilities of public officials to access and understand research studies (Head, Ferguson, Cherney, & Boreham, 2014), budget constraints (Cameron et al., 2011) and a culture that reinforces and supports active attempts to draw on academic research (Cherney et al., 2015). Scholars therefore have a basic duty to eliminate potential barriers to uptake. The most fundamental is to “make sense” of their research and present it in a compelling way—a trend that scholars are increasingly open to (see, for example, the Translating Research into Policy (TRIP) initiative, the International Policy Summer Institute at American University, and the Scholars Strategy Network). Education scholars in particular are beginning to assert their role in policy (Oakes, 2016; Sparks, 2015).

Future directions for this area are open, but should start with reflection. Education scholars need to decide whether to emphasize professionalization (which entails conforming to the norms and incentives in the academic industry) or public communication/engagement. Can they do both? Harvard professor Stephen Walt (2011) argues that the growing research-policy gap is due to academia's growing professionalization and suggests that scholars ought not jump too quickly into public engagement, which may erode their credibility and jeopardize the academic process. While true, this tendency prevents scholars from influencing public attitudes. If they believe public communication or engagement is the more important, then scholars must consider whether collaborating with policymakers will affect their public perception or credibility over the long term.

The next step would likely involve how best to expose the public to scholarly research aside from peer-reviewed or professional journals. One idea is to create easy-to-read briefs, similar to the 2-page policy briefs or summaries that policymakers often turn to (see Dhaliwal & Tulloch, 2012; McBride, Coburn, Mackinney, Mueller, Slifkin, & Wakefield, 2008). What are the role of journal editorial boards and peer reviewers (i.e., the gatekeepers)? Do they encourage plainspoken, jargon-free language? Will they accept changes to convention, such as putting the most important findings, implications, and real-world recommendations at the front of their articles—rather than buried at the end—as policymakers appear to prefer? Will education researchers establish communication journals devoted to education as the science fields have done (e.g., *Science Communication*, *Public Understanding of Science and Communication Research*)? Or does it mean creating more mainstream yet specialized magazines similar to *Popular Science* or *Foreign Affairs*?

In the end, the risks associated with public engagement suggest the need to temper the growing calls for the academic community to collaborate closely with policy personnel and focus more on discussing, teaching, sharing, and most importantly, making sense of information—i.e., communicating more effectively. Framing provides a useful foundation from which scholars can begin to establish a public voice, one that can compete with politicians, the media, and other special interests. If framing effects depend on the credibility of the communicator and the values of the recipient, then scholars—compared with other groups—may hold significant advantages, as research indicates (see, for example, O’Brien, 2013). They need only focus on presenting the issues in compelling ways that expand the public’s understanding of education and inequality. That foundation can impact scholars’ public influence in ways that have long eluded them.

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Table 1.

Six Ways to Frame the Energy Conservation Issue

<u>Frame</u>	<u>Energy Conservation Message</u>
Economic	<i>This is an excellent way to save money.</i>
Energy Independence	<i>This is a means for our country to free itself from dependence on foreign oil.</i>
Legacy	<i>This is a way to protect our children's future.</i>
Stewardship	<i>This is how I honor my moral obligation to protect the abiding wonders and mystery of life.</i>
Religious	<i>This is a way to serve God by protecting His creation.</i>
Nationalist	<i>Innovative technology will keep our nation's economy strong.</i>

Source: Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz (2008)

Figure 1.

The Widespread Austerity “Story”

Plot: The U.K. government and individuals were borrowing too much and spending without thinking how they would repay the cost. As a result, the mountains of debt led to the financial crisis. The only way to fix the mess was to cut spending, repay the debts, and eliminate the deficit.

Heroes: The ones who work hard and play the rules, which include entrepreneurs who create wealth vital for the economy and coalition politicians who make the tough choices to fix the broken economy.

Moral: You cannot live beyond your means; doing penance by tightening our belts is the best solution to reducing the deficit and a good lesson to learn.

Intrigue: Are you a *Striver* (one who works hard, earn, and pay taxes) or a *Skiver* (someone who wants something for nothing)?

Source: NEF (2013)

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