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Definitions and Uses of a Key Policy Term in Federal Law and Local School-Board
Deliberations

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Author note

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Abstract

Focusing on “research” as a key term in debates over U.S. education policy, this article compares the definition of research in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with the meanings and uses of research in school-board deliberations in three local districts in Wisconsin. While NCLB articulates a narrow view of research and a hierarchy of methods, the school boards operated with an expansive meaning of research and combined its use with other evidence types. Appreciating the role that values play in crafting public policy, these local debates balanced technical and public modes of reasoning.

Key words: research, public policy, evidence, deliberation, education

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Deliberations

Education policy in the United States takes shape through the debates of diverse interlocutors interacting in various locales. Parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and others deliberate about education policy in public meetings in middle-school gymnasiums, casual conversations at neighborhood gatherings, structured meetings at district offices, and elsewhere. Negotiating these various constituencies, thousands of school-board members across the nation bear much of the responsibility for crafting policy, making decisions about curriculum, instruction, personnel, and finances. Historically, these decisions have been regarded as local matters, since each community presumably knows best how to educate its children (Graham, 2005; Reese, 2005). However, in recent decades, a national push for standards has confronted the local character of education policy. Frustrated with flagging academic achievement, many federal and state policymakers shifted the focus of education policy in the 1980s from inputs to outcomes, demanding greater accountability and advocating standards and testing as the measures of school success. As a result, local officials, who direct the daily operations of schools and classrooms, face an increasing number of federal prescriptions designed to guide their decision-making (McGuinn, 2006; Rothstein, 2004).

In this policy environment, research has emerged as a key term linking national and local debates. In the view of some policymakers and analysts, research serves demands for accountability by promising a sound basis for decision-making that may avoid partisan

conflict (Coburn, Toure & Yamashita, 2009; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Slavin, 2002).

Exemplifying this aspiration, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which represents the codification of the standards movement at the federal level, explicitly mentions “research” over 100 times (Smith, 2003). The legislation calls for a research basis to guide decisions ranging from reading instruction to teacher training to drop-out prevention (Honig & Coburn, 2008). For instance, NCLB (2002, p. 1552) seeks “to enhance the early language, literacy, and prereading development of preschool age children, particularly those from low-income families, through strategies and professional development that are based on scientifically based reading research.” Elsewhere, the law calls for “promoting strong teaching skills for mathematics and science teachers and teacher educators, including integrating reliable scientifically based research [on] teaching methods” (2002, p. 1645). And these constitute only a few of the applications envisioned for research.

Far from resolving disagreement, research may propel controversy about education and other issues, raising important questions for argument scholars. First, while foregrounding research highlights expertise as the basis of education policy, the people debating this topic—board members, administrators, teachers, parents, students, and others—address issues that exceed the institutional confines of education research. As John Dewey noted in his discussion of its democratic impulses, education in its broadest sense constitutes the communication of social practices, beliefs, and values. Education sustains the “social continuity of life” by communicating “habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger” (1916/1944, pp. 2, 3). Expertise offers no privileged perspective on this communicative process, which instead interpolates people as citizens. Second, school-board members, who remain the key decision-makers at the local level,

negotiate complex and potentially conflicting roles as elected officials, experts, and community members; these different roles cannot be subsumed under a communication model based on an idealized vision of research. In these roles, school-board members often must balance their understanding of technical policy problems with their awareness of community interests and values (Tracy, 2010). Third, key policy terms connote different meanings among the various participants and across the multiform sites of policy debate. These differences in meaning themselves reflect differences in outlooks and values that shape understandings of policy issues.

Examining these issues, this study compares the meanings and uses of research in two sites of policy debate across a networked public sphere. The first site is the definition of research articulated in NCLB itself—a definition that may prompt objections by people who actually conduct education research (Hostetler, 2010). Nevertheless, as rhetorical scholars have argued, definitions inform policy debates by framing issues, constituting relevant audiences and competencies, and privileging particular modes of inquiry (Schiappa, 2003). Attending to the definition in NCLB, then, offers insights into federal understandings of research, which may or may not be taken up at the local level. To investigate the latter, our second site consists of school-board deliberations in three districts in Wisconsin. While rhetorical scholars often focus on policy debates at the national and international levels, local debates stand as important forums of policymaking. Education policy in particular brings together state actors and citizens, experts and laypeople, to craft mutually acceptable proposals for pursuing commonly identified community needs, interests, and goals. Considering these two sites of policy debate, we situate our analysis within the theoretical literature on the public sphere, which

increasingly has focused on examining relations among disparate discursive forums. In particular, we reference G. Thomas Goodnight’s theory of the personal, technical, and public spheres of argument to elucidate the tensions between expertise and democracy that arise in the foregrounding of research as a basis for education policy. As we discuss below, accessing the local school-board debates generated a methodological challenge, since these discourses, unlike their federal counterparts, are not available in public databases or archives. To gather texts of the local debates for our rhetorical analysis, we engaged in ethnographic observation of school-board meetings, recording these meetings and creating our own transcripts.

We argue that the definition of research in NCLB presents an oversimplified model of decision-making that discounts deliberation and ignores the complex issues faced by school-board members and other local officials. NCLB presents an overly narrow view of research that privileges specific methods and imagines research as a means of reducing uncertainty and resolving disagreement in education policy. In contrast, the school-board debates we observed operated with an expansive meaning of research and combined the use of research with other evidence types such as examples, experience, data, and testimony. Moreover, these local debates balanced technical and public modes of reasoning, appreciating better than NCLB the role that values play in crafting public policy. Our study begins with an explication of relationality in a networked public sphere. Next, we explain our methodological use of textual analysis and ethnography. Our analysis first examines the definition of research in NCLB and second considers the meanings and uses of research in the school-board deliberations we observed.

Policy Debate in a Networked Public Sphere

While legislative bodies retain the responsibility for crafting laws and policies, policy debate in the contemporary United States unfolds in a networked public sphere. Innumerable discussions animated by diverse participants circulate policy discourses across institutional and non-institutional forums. Our reference to a “networked public sphere” invokes a scholarly shift, which has emerged over the past few decades, emphasizing multiplicity in studying the public sphere (Brouwer, 2005; Brouwer & Asen, 2010; Fraser, 1992). In his landmark account of the bourgeois public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) gestured toward multiplicity, examining various national contexts and acknowledging a proletarian variant. However, we discern a shift in emphasis from universality to relationality as a key difference between his discussion and contemporary scholarship. The bourgeoisie claimed a universal quality for their discussions, believing they could represent the perspectives of excluded others. Public opinion in a networked public sphere does not refer to the extrapolated discourse of a single forum, as the bourgeoisie claimed, but to an “anonymous ‘public conversation’” produced through variously connected nodes (Benhabib, 1996, p. 74).

Read through the lens of a networked public sphere, Goodnight’s theory of the personal, technical, and public spheres of argument provides a framework for thinking about relationality. In particular, he calls attention to the “grounds” and “authorities” of argument (1982, p. 216). Grounds refer to the implicit and explicit norms and practices that structure arguments. Authorities refer to individuals who may be invoked to substantiate claims and audiences who judge the reasonableness of arguments. An important distinction between technical and public spheres of argument, which informs

and often complicates their relations, concerns degrees of homogeneity or heterogeneity. Arguments in technical spheres tend to draw from and appeal to a body of experts, even as different technical spheres constitute expertise differently, whereas a public sphere of argument invites the participation of all people potentially affected by an issue. Further, in a technical sphere, regular participants operate according to explicitly and implicitly established rules and procedures. For instance, education researchers trained in the social sciences concur that a well-selected sample may be used to study a population. In important respects, deliberations occurring in technical spheres depend on this background agreement—without shared understandings about what constitutes a sample, scholars would lose confidence in the findings of much education research. The difficulty for school boards is that—in addition to the diverse audiences they engage—no such agreement guides their deliberative procedures. Standards may vary from issue to issue and, even on a single issue, from participant to participant. Diverse advocates and audiences bring with them diverse standards of judgment for deliberation.

Relationality may take different shapes, as scholars studying the public sphere have demonstrated. Inviting such inquiries, Goodnight (1982, p. 220) himself notes that “any particular argument artifact *can be taken* to be grounded in any one of the spheres or a combinatory relationship.” Exploring permeable borders between spheres, Josh Boyd (2002, p. 92) examines how communicative practices in regulatory controversies “bridge the public and technical spheres of argument.” In addition to bridging spheres, debates may demarcate boundaries and set agendas among spheres, as Lisa Keränen demonstrates in her analysis of controversies over allegations of fraud in breast-cancer research. Keränen (2005, p. 94) holds that advocates in this controversy “rhetorically constructed

boundaries between science and its stakeholders and between public and technical realms of expertise.” Sometimes, shifting agendas may appear as encroachments, as numerous studies have shown (e.g., Hogan, 1991; Rowland, 1986). At other times, particular individuals and groups may foster changes in argument practices in and across spheres. Valeria Fabj and Matthew Sobnosky (1995) have examined how AIDS activists have used the strategies of redefinition and translation to claim authority to speak on the issue.

Constituting a critical selection of two nodes in a networked public sphere, our analysis considers how meanings of key policy terms differ across discursive forums. NCLB articulates a definition of research that seeks to restrict meanings and reduce the contingency of policy deliberations. It imagines practices that follow established procedures and lead to clear conclusions. However, school-board deliberations expand the meaning of research, including research conducted in institutional settings but also inquiries launched by laypeople in vernacular contexts. Drawing on the perspective-taking and knowledge-generating capacities of deliberation, school-board members sometimes employ their own debates as critical investigative processes. In this way, our analysis indicates how relations take shape across a networked public sphere, even when participants in different sites do not explicitly debate each other—or, perhaps, especially when they do not explicitly debate. As Benhabib’s (1996, p. 74) reference to an “anonymous ‘public conversation’” suggests, relations among nodes in a networked public sphere emerge through expected and unexpected, known and unknown, direct and indirect links. Policy debates circulate through communication channels of which interlocutors are only partially aware.

As a component of federal legislation, the definition of research in NCLB exhibits powerful rhetorical dynamics. Law speaks as law, obtaining its authority from a putatively disinterested vantage point that does not place the needs or interests of one group above another. As Douglas Walton (2001, p. 122) observes, public understandings of definitions often assume that “words, especially scientific terms and terms used in legal statutes and government regulations, have an objective meaning.” From this vantage point, definitions seemingly describe terms as they are, supposedly “isolat[ing] something fundamental at the core of a concept” (McGee, 1999, p. 153). However, following the lead of scholars of argument and definition, we maintain that the definition of research in NCLB articulates a position in debates over education policy. This definition casts education policy as a technical endeavor, but school boards constitute hybrid bodies that often must address technical issues and public concerns. Explicating how definitions influence perception, Edward Schiappa (2003, p. 30) maintains that definitions “persuade us to see and talk about the world in certain ways and not in others.” Connecting definitions to argument spheres, Schiappa (2003, p. 156) holds that “the act of defining a situation [as personal, technical, or public], especially in public discourse, simultaneously identifies a competent audience for the contested issue, specifies a type of knowledge being sought, and suggests appropriate modes of analysis.” NCLB enacts all of these functions, while neglecting alternative evidentiary bases for public policy, such as teachers’ professional experience or testimony from students. Experts conversant in the technical sphere of education research should establish the foundation for constructing policy. In this way, NCLB exemplifies the power of definitions to frame situations and function as “context-specific ‘rules’ for actors’ judgments and actions” (Cox, 1981, p. 197).

Definitions also inform policy debate by intimating a permanence that obscures their contingent character. Along these lines, Brian McGee (1999, p. 142) maintains that “arguments from definition encourage a perception that such definitions are permanent and unchangeable.” Yet he retorts that “the act of definition isolates what might at the moment seem to be particularly important ideas or attributes of a concept, but those important ideas or attributes could be called into question in the future” (1999, p. 153). As participants in and objects of public debate, definitions may change as advocates contest their meanings. In this way, Catherine Palczewski (1995, p. 179) explains, definitions set boundaries that advocates may redraw. Similarly, NCLB seeks to establish a specific definition of research to guide education policy, but school-board deliberations construe research more expansively to meet their needs and interests.

A Hybrid Method

Studying policy debates across the nodes of a networked public sphere presents challenges regarding the accessibility of various discourses, encouraging scholars to employ various methods for discovering texts for analysis. Scholars may access the texts of public laws fairly easily through databases and government depositories, but accessing the texts of school-board debates and other local discourses may prove more difficult. To address this challenge, we adopted a hybrid method that complements traditional rhetorical analysis with ethnographic observation of school-board meetings. Our ethnographic fieldwork enabled us to discover otherwise unavailable texts for rhetorical analysis and to learn about the local district cultures that made research meaningful in ways that exceeded the strictures of NCLB. Our study, too, combines a close textual

analysis of the definition of research in NCLB with a thematic analysis of the rhetorical dynamics of research in the meetings we observed.

Our attention to local contexts of policymaking, which is part of a larger study titled the Research on Education, Deliberation, and Decision-Making (REDD) project, focuses on the deliberations of three medium-sized school districts in Wisconsin: Beloit, West Bend, and Elmbrook. Beloit serves an economically struggling, working-class city along the Wisconsin-Illinois border with a diverse student population. More than half of the students in this district are African-American or Hispanic, and a majority of all students in the district come from economically disadvantaged families. The school board is primarily concerned with improving student performance, yet they face the harsh reality of a community that cannot afford significantly higher property taxes. West Bend serves a politically conservative, middle-class “exurban” area of Milwaukee with a majority white (90 percent) student population. In this district, roughly one-quarter of the students come from economically disadvantaged families. One of the primary concerns of the school board is space/facilities, as their student population has grown, but the community—often vociferously—has refused to support higher taxes. Elmbrook serves some of the upper-middle-class, professional, western suburbs of Milwaukee with a majority white (90 percent) student population. Most students in this district (90 percent) come from economically stable families. This district regards itself as a top-performing district in the state, and the school board is primarily concerned with maintaining the district’s high standards of achievement.

Between September 1, 2009, and August 31, 2010, we attended 160 school-board and committee meetings across the districts. Addressing controversial topics, some of

these meetings drew large crowds, such as a meeting about a proposed increase in the tax levy in one district that drew over 500 community members to a middle-school gymnasium. Other meetings were attended by only a few observers, including members of the REDD project. We made audio recordings and took extensive field notes of each meeting. We used the audio recordings to produce meeting transcripts, and the field notes enabled us to develop a keener sense of the board dynamics and culture of each of our districts.

Working inductively, we examined a subset of the meeting transcripts to identify evidence used in the meetings, generating six evidence types: research, experience, examples, testimony, data, and law/policy. We define research as empirical findings derived from systematic analysis of information, guided by purposeful research questions and method. Our definition recognizes the importance of critically reflecting on one’s questions and method, but it does not restrict the questions that researchers may ask or the means they may employ to seek answers; both qualitative and quantitative inquiries fall under this definition of research, including large-scale experimental studies, district-initiated analyses of enrollment trends, teacher-conducted interviews of one’s students, or other approaches. Employing this topical framework to code all of the transcripts for evidence use, we found that research was the fifth most frequent type of evidence used, appearing ahead of only law/policy and far less often than experience and examples, the two most common types of evidence used by the school boards. Building on our preliminary coding of the transcripts, we compiled all references to research into an evidence document for a more detailed analysis. In doing so, we considered larger patterns

across the meetings as well as illuminating instances. This work constituted our rhetorical analysis of the board meetings.

Our hybrid method departs from an exclusively text-based approach and elevates discovery as an additional way of rhetorical knowing. Scholars in rhetoric and communication typically have studied national and international policy debates at the expense of local debates (e.g., Doxtader, 2009; Mitchell, 2000; Parry-Giles, 2006). Some of this focus reflects widespread scholarly interest in far-reaching debates and controversies, which may captivate critical attention and portend significant consequences for democratic deliberation. Yet, this focus also manifests the availability of texts for study. Plainly put, speeches and debates at school-board meetings and other local events do not get anthologized; we typically do not assign them for study in our classrooms. Along these lines, Phaedra Pezzullo (2003, p. 350) notes that ethnography enables scholars to “witness and record discourses that are left out of traditional written records.” To study local school-board deliberations, we needed to generate an extensive set of texts based on our fieldwork.

Attending to multiple levels of governance enables comparative studies that illustrate how policy takes shapes across legislative and deliberative sites and forums. Our attendance at meetings has enabled us to learn a great deal about the values and cultures of the districts in our study. In this spirit, Dwight Conquergood (1992, p. 81) explains that ethnography may enable rhetoricians to understand more fully the “cultural constructedness of key concepts such as ‘reason,’ ‘the rational,’ ‘the logical,’ ‘argument,’ ‘evidence,’ and so forth.” For example, members of the Elmbrook school board tend to employ a technocratic deliberation and decision-making style that values “data” as an

important evidence type. Negotiating this culture, top administrators frame district-initiated studies as data in their presentations to the board. This framing removes potential conflicts among research findings, which have surfaced in Elmbrook meetings, and instead purports to describe things simply as they are.

A hybrid approach also may yield greater information about decision makers and board dynamics. Fieldwork may offer insights into participants’ presentational style and personal comportment that cannot be gleaned through transcripts. For instance, Milt Thompson, the superintendent in Beloit, is an experienced administrator who stands tall and speaks with a booming voice. While the board members do not always agree with the superintendent, they respect him. And while his authority stems from his experience, knowledge, and ability to relate to different constituencies, his physical and vocal presence also contribute to his authority. Thompson’s stature also suggests that participants in debates may occupy comparatively central and marginal positions. Clues about these dynamics—as well as overall cohesion and/or division among board members—may be uncovered through textual cues, such as the frequency and extent to which someone participates. Yet non-verbal cues observable through fieldwork also may serve as signs of influence and status.

In our study, ethnography operates within a set of processes designed to foster collection and examination of various types of texts. Through our analysis of school board deliberations and the settings in which they occur, we attend to the ways in which national education issues manifest locally, the cultural construction of certain modes of decision-making, and the potential roles of board and community dynamics. In demonstrating how

fieldwork as a method of discovery enables our work as rhetorical critics, we suggest the value of different ways of knowing and highlight the advantages of a hybrid approach.

The Definition of Research Evidence in No Child Left Behind

Ascribing a central role to research in education policy, No Child Left Behind specifies “scientifically based research” as the basis of decision making. NCLB (2002, pp. 1964-1965) defines “scientifically based research” as “the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs.” The law indicates that scientifically based research includes “systematic empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment”; “rigorous data analyses” to test hypotheses and conclusions; “reliable and valid data across evaluators and observers”; “experimental or quasi-experimental designs” with appropriate controls; “sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication” or systematic building on findings. In addition, NCLB associates a formal review process with scientifically based research, regarding such research as “accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts.”

Privileging particular types of research while devaluing alternatives, NCLB propagates a hierarchy of research methods, which officials in the Department of Education endorsed in the weeks after the passage of the law. At a department-sponsored conference titled *The Use of Scientifically Based Research in Education*, Valerie Reyna (2002), who supervised research programs for the department’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, identified randomized control trials as “the gold standard,” “the highest level of evidence,” “what [researchers] should rely on with the greatest weight by far.”

Randomized control trials appeared at the top of the research hierarchy because they permitted causal reasoning. Enabling correlations but not causal claims, studies mining large databases constituted a second tier of research evidence. At the bottom of the hierarchy lurked case studies, which Reyna dismissed as “entertaining” but unreliable because they offered “a weak basis to generalize to many, many people.” Although scholars may rebuke Reyna’s hierarchy for perpetuating a naïve view of science (see Prelli, 1989), her position at the Department of Education demonstrated its currency for NCLB. Moreover, hierarchies of this type still circulate in discussions of the role of research in public policy (e.g., Wyckoff, 2009). For these reasons, NCLB’s definition of scientifically based research, which is not necessarily shared by education researchers, warrants analysis on its own terms.

Calling for “objective procedures,” NCLB imagines scientifically based research as value-neutral. This vision is underscored through multiple references to “reliability” and “validity” that serve to guard against the “biases” of the researcher conducting the research. Krippendorff (2004, p. 211) explains that reliability means that “data (a) have been generated with all conceivable precautions in place against known pollutants, distortions, and biases, intentional or accidental, and (b) mean the same thing for everyone who uses them.” Validity, in turn, indicates that “inferences drawn from the available texts withstand the test of independently available evidence” (p. 313). These definitions, which express conventional understandings of reliability and validity, indicate the associations invoked by NCLB. Individual perspectives appear as “pollutants” and “distortions” that compromise the integrity of research. Reliable and valid research makes researchers interchangeable: who conducts the study should not matter, since the knowledge it generates reveals law-

like truths that ground human contingency. Although education researchers have critiqued narrow “experimentist” (Howe, 2005) approaches to research and policy, NCLB articulates a value-free vision of research that places it above the political fray, thus providing an objective and fair resolution to partisan squabbles. Hostetler (2010, p. 401) holds that this vision of education research as scientific only to the extent to which it brackets values “could be the minority view among education researchers today, yet it enjoys the sanction of the US federal government.”

Prescribing a proper relationship between research and policy, NCLB envisions a particular model of the circulation of research from lab to field. This piece of legislation suggests that research happens within particular institutions and settings, as indicated by its reference to “peer-reviewed journal(s)” and “panel(s) of independent experts” as the authorities evaluating the research. This model assigns particular roles to researchers and policymakers: researchers produce knowledge, and policymakers consume it (see Bogenscheinder & Corbett, 2010). Explicitly unanswered is the question of how producers and consumers connect with each other. Peer-review permits (academic) producers to remain within the familiar confines of scholarly publishing to fulfill their obligations. To this degree, the law places the burden on (policy) consumers to traverse unfamiliar scholarly literatures in search of relevant research findings. Moreover, this model discounts resources, capacities, and interests at the district level for conducting localized, but non-peer-reviewed, research.

NCLB situates research in a problem-solving model, but, unlike communicative models of problem-solving, NCLB discounts the need for deliberation. Across the various applications it assigns to research, NCLB imagines a particular procedure for making

decisions: policymakers identify a problem; generate and evaluate potential solutions; and select the best solution. Research ostensibly enters this process in the solution generation and evaluation stage (see Shulock, 1999; Stone, 1997). For instance, if a school board determines that the elementary-school students are not reading as well as they should, they should consult the research on reading instruction to determine strategies for improvement. After considering various possibilities, board members should implement the strategy that offers the most promise. This vision attributes a particular mindset to board members and administrators: when problems are identified, decision makers proceed with an open mind about how to solve them. Note, too, the implicit power of research to reduce contingency in this model prescribed by NCLB. Decision-makers move from a state of uncertainty to certainty in identifying the best solution. In this model, research settles issues. Deliberation appears as a superfluous activity, since the best solution—tested through research—resolves disagreement. Indeed, deliberation may signal a wrong turn in path to a right answer.

The limits of NCLB’s definition of scientifically based research for school-board deliberations lie in its primary emphasis and narrow scope. In itself, associating research and education policy is valuable, since research may offer a potentially shared basis for deciding complicated and potentially controversial issues. Although not conclusive, research may help determine, for instance, the successes and failures of various approaches to reading instruction. Research also may encourage advocates to seek common ground. While values inform policy debates, sometimes value differences and competing ideologies may obscure potential paths to resolving seemingly intractable disagreements. The problem with NCLB’s definition is that it seeks to establish research as

a primary evidentiary basis for public policy. However, as our analysis of school-board deliberations suggests, board members draw on a variety of evidence in deciding policy. Moreover, NCLB identifies a particular type of research as suitable, discounting qualitative and critical approaches. While many academic researchers value practitioner-initiated, site-based research—such as teachers collecting students’ stories about their educational experiences—as an illuminating form of “action research” (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Noffke, 2009; Zeichner, 2001), NCLB’s definition would discount these approaches as failing tests of validity and reliability.

School Boards’ Use of Research Evidence

School boards enact a complex deliberative process that calls on board members to negotiate multiple and potentially competing interests and demands. School board members cannot simply impose technical requirements, but must carefully negotiate the often-conflicting viewpoints of community members. To use research evidence, they must access materials that may not be directly available in public settings, find time amid family, work, and board responsibilities, and negotiate the structure of board meetings. In these ways, the dynamic context of school board deliberation resists the narrow definition and methodological hierarchy invoked by NCLB.

Although federal law may call for scientifically based research, its direct use played a comparatively modest role in the board deliberations we observed. Research accounted for fewer than 10 percent of all evidence use, with examples and experience constituting the most frequently used evidence. However, frequency does not indicate function; analyzing the latter remains important for understanding how key terms circulate in a

networked public sphere. Further, this discrepancy between insistence and uptake attests to the tension between NCLB’s research-focused prescriptions and the particular dynamics of school board meetings. In terms of their use of research evidence, meeting participants often made vague rather than detailed research references, which they invoked as a brief citation to a broader argument rather than as a central premise for the argument. Yet this ambiguity sometimes bolstered rather than weakened deliberations: the deployment of research in school board meetings reflected its role as one inventional resource among others. Whereas NCLB discounted deliberation, board members, administrators, and others used research to construct arguments that situated policy issues amid (sometimes conflicting) community values. This section explores the dynamics of research evidence by examining three prominent themes that emerged in the meetings we observed.

“The Research Says . . .”

Most often, when school-board members and other meeting participants referenced research evidence, they did not cite particular studies, nor did they highlight the qualities of “rigorous, systematic, and objective” research imagined by NCLB. Instead, meeting participants often asserted generally that “the research says . . .”. In Elmbrook, for instance, during a debate over whether the high-school science curriculum should incorporate classes with students of mixed abilities or track students into regular and advanced courses, a district administrator maintained that “research shows us when you have a mixed group, you will have greater learning going on.” Similarly, in a presentation to the Beloit school board urging more nutritious meals in the schools, one of the presenters held that “research has shown that hunger can actually explain 27 percent of

the differences in aggressive behavior among children.” In West Bend, in a discussion of the possibility of shortening the school week, an administrator argued that “they’re moving forward with the research in wanting to expand the school year to more days, so we’d be going in the opposite direction of their direction.” And a school principal in Beloit, in advocating increased time for advanced placement courses, maintained that “from some of the literature, you’ll see too that it says two periods are really best for teaching situations, but I haven’t seen where it says anything works for all situations.” Importantly, in each of these examples, the presenter did not expound upon their research reference and no one else remarked on it.

As these references illustrate, claims about what the “research says” typically consisted of a one- or two-sentence invocation of “research” or of “literature.” The structure of these references typically began with the mentioning of research and followed with a description of a specific finding. As these examples suggest, the most distinguishing feature of general references to research is their vagueness: few, if any, identifying markers provide information about the authorship, design, populations, settings, or conclusions of the “studies” obliquely referenced. What interlocutors may glean from these references is that research has substantiated some claim. In this way, general references do not function as reports on scholarly literatures; rather, those invoking research said very little about the “research” referenced. Indeed, in these references, the particulars of a study or line of research seem comparatively unimportant. Rather, research functions significantly in its *status as research*. Research bolsters the credibility and authority of the claim being made and of the person who cites it (see Goodwin & Honeycutt, 2009). Referencing research suggests that the person has reflected on an issue, sought out additional information, and

developed relevant competencies. Moreover, referencing research serves as a marker of non-partisanship. The person referencing research places his or her position above the partisan fray—while others debate about district policy in terms of particular interests, the person attuned to research putatively invokes an objective good.

Further, by positioning “research” as author and source, these references cast institutions—and not people—as agents. By implication, these references removed the researcher from research, obscuring the roles of personal perspectives and values in informing research questions and designs and inclining investigators towards particular methods. By abstracting research, meeting participants affirmed the idea of research as a static enterprise detached from human actors. Moreover, in anthropomorphizing an institution, claims about research speaking implied a high degree of interaction, coordination, and consensus among disparate sites of research. Research spoke with one voice, giving policymakers ostensibly clear, confident, and easily applied policy directives about science, nutrition, and other issues that belied the complicated terrain they brought into being. In these ways, invocations of research as an institution appealed to the cultural authority of “research” generally against the qualified voice of many specific studies.

In a few cases, seemingly contrasting claims about the “research says” challenged the singular voice of research, but these claims did not resolve the ambiguity attending general references to research. For instance, as we note above, a staff member in Elmbrook invoked a general reference to research in arguing for the benefits of mixed-ability groupings of students in the high-school science curriculum. Later in the meeting, a parent in attendance, who was subsequently elected to the school board, challenged the administrator’s previous claim about research on mixed-ability groupings: “There’s quite a

bit of research that says it doesn't benefit anybody particularly, it's kind of neutral if you group kids or not group them; there are other studies that say grouping kids is harmful for the honors students or the gifted students, that they learn much faster if they're in a separate group.” This rejoinder broke up the seemingly singular voice of research—research consisted instead of numerous studies, which espoused diverse and sometimes contradictory findings. Yet the parent's retort did not offer meeting participants a basis for deciding among competing findings, since she did not elaborate on the studies she mentioned. Indeed, her response followed the basic structure of the “research says” claim, expressing two of these statements in succession.

The assertion of “research says” attributed a directness and transparency to findings that elided the complexity of research, particularly in relation to the impact of mediating steps between a research question and its answer(s). References to “research says” condensed the process of research into a conclusive product, with the advocate claiming a statement of fact. However, the ambiguity underlying the invocation of “research says” contrasted the purportedly specific nature of the claimant's assertions. Ambiguous claims about anonymous studies often grounded arguments about district policies in confident, unambiguous tones, as was the case for both the staff member and parent in the Elmbrook discussion of the high-school science curriculum.

Without attendant details about questions, methods, populations, and other qualities, research appeared as decontextualized statements about the effectiveness of policy. Indeed, the power of claims about the “research says” arose importantly from their lack of context. Advocates invoked research generally on range of topics, and no consistent pattern emerged in the deployment of this claim. In school-board deliberations, context

would have served a limiting function, setting constraints on the application of research across situations. These invocations functioned not in terms of their ambiguous content but their clear structure: “research says X” achieved its force from the authority of its subject, while its object established a topical connection to the issue under consideration. In this spirit, Murray Edelman (1971, p. 80), has noted that ambiguous phrases may bolster an advocate’s authority by encouraging audiences “to entrust responsibility to someone who can cope [with a problem or issue] by finding in the striking rhetoric an assurance of clear-sightedness and determination.” Underscoring the issue of authority, district administrators cited research—both generally and specifically—nearly twice as often as school-board members.

The Value of Repeated Research References

Research often appeared in the school-board deliberations as a passing reference, speaking to one issue before returning to its institutional abode. In one case, a particular line of research stayed for a longer visit, as participants invoked it over the course of multiple meetings and related it to different topics. In the process, this research crafted a shared knowledge among board members. Board members, administrators, and others in Beloit, Wisconsin frequently cited the “Stevenson model,” which referenced a research paradigm based on the popular successes of the high-achieving Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois (Hipp & Weber, 2008; Kanold, 2006; Servage, 2008). Promoted through a series of books and lectures by former Stevenson principal Richard Dufour, the model denotes an approach to ongoing teacher development that emphasizes collaborative learning communities. Dufour attributes the successes of Stevenson, which

regularly has been named by news publications as a “Top 100” high school in the United States, to his preferred approach to professional development (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

In Beloit, Dufour’s most prominent devotee was first-year superintendent Milton Thompson, who referenced “Stevenson” repeatedly, declaring himself “brainwashed” by the model. Hired to provide new direction for a struggling district, Thompson invoked Stevenson on a variety of district issues as evidence for the anticipated success of his preferred proposals and strategies. Other administrators in the district, including the high school principal and the assistant superintendent for educational services similarly mentioned “Stevenson” or simply “Adlai.” Yet neither Thompson nor others shared the specific subjects discussed or processes adopted by administrators and teachers at Stevenson. Rather than consisting of a reliable and valid set of procedures and practices for improving student performance in Beloit, this knowledge stood as an exemplar for a district serving an economically struggling community. As such, the ambiguous invocation of Stevenson functioned primarily as a *symbol of shared value* (Sapir 1934; Kaufer & Carley, 1993) for achievement.

Commanding the respect of board members and other meeting participants, Thompson held up Stevenson as a vision of what the district could achieve. For instance, in asking the school board to adopt a new grading system for the district, Thompson argued that his proposal would help to bridge the achievement gap. Articulating his reasons for replacing the grades “D” and “F” with “M” (missing) and “I” (incomplete), Thompson noted that “Stevenson’s a national example, that they eliminated a lot of student-initiated choices when they’re getting Ds and F’s, that it’s “No, you’re failing. You’ve got to go to such and such and get that kind of work.” Thompson’s claim implied that Stevenson High School had

a similarly innovative system for managing student delinquency. Similarly, when high school teachers reported to the board about a series of programs they had implemented at the high school, Thompson interjected, “that’s some of the Stevenson stuff that we’re exploring in what we’re reading.” Without explaining who constituted the “we,” he situated the changes taking place at Beloit Memorial High School in the context of Stevenson literature that he had encouraged others to read.

Without explaining Stevenson’s model in greater detail, Thompson’s appeals to Stevenson drew their force from the power of positive association. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, p. 190) explain, association entails “bring[ing] separate elements together . . . to establish a unity among them, which aims at either organizing them or evaluating them, positively or negatively.” By repeatedly invoking Stevenson, Thompson effectively aligned the model with his own administrative approach. In doing so, he drew on his authoritative persona and the goodwill granted him as a new administrator hired in July 2009 by a board seeking change. Not only did Thompson’s citation function to support the efforts undertaken at the Beloit school, it also associated those efforts with Thompson’s new administration of the district. Stevenson connoted change, but, more specifically, it connoted change guided by Thompson. In hiring him as their superintendent, the board endorsed Thompson’s plans for improving student achievement in the district. Objecting to a Stevenson association so early in his tenure would have served as an implicit rebuke of their own decision-making. Repeated references to Stevenson thus served as a reminder of Thompson’s newness to the district and the board’s belief that since past practices had not been effective, they needed to place their faith in the changes Thompson represented.

Although Beloit and Stevenson both reference local school districts, their distinctiveness (or separation) arises from the socioeconomic differences and attendant resources available in the working-class, blue-collar community of Beloit and the upper-class, white-collar community of Lincolnshire. Potential separations emerge, too, from the curricular and instructional practices employed by teachers and administrators in the districts. Therefore, the productive association offered by the Stevenson model came at the expense of engaging the significant differences between Stevenson and Beloit. And without addressing these differences, Thompson’s ambiguous reference to Stevenson invited an inference from his audience that adopting the new grading system would make comparable achievement possible in Beloit. The ambiguous research references elided the different constraints shaping policy implementation in the different districts. The “research” functioned primarily to bolster the image of a policy proposal, rather than to define how it could be effectively implemented.

Demonstrating its cultural currency and authority, Stevenson surfaced as an ultimate evidentiary basis for a group of Beloit administrators seeking to defend a program whose efficacy board members had begun to question. The initiative, called New Directions, involved a set of educational interventions targeted toward freshmen and designed to improve their performance as they pursued their secondary education. In a November 2009 report to the school board on the progress of New Directions, then high school principal Carlton Jenkins explained how educators “went to Adlai Stevenson High School, just got back from that school, which is a national school in terms of best practices for some of our students, and we found some things at that school, too, that we also wanna look at in terms of Beloit Memorial High School.” Although New Directions had been in

place for three years, data collected by the district could not confirm that students participating in the program performed any better in high school than previous classes of freshman who had not participated in New Directions. Nevertheless, Jenkins referenced Stevenson in an attempt to garner support for its continuance. With little data to support the program’s efficacy, he invoked Stevenson to reassure a skeptical school board that New Directions would change for the better. Six months later, with the school board positioned to end funding for New Directions, interim high school principal Mark Smullen nervously made a final defense of the program: “We’re working on this and getting this going, but one thing too that we thought of too is what, what we learned from Adlai Stevenson, is a model like, similar to like this, with our, with our schedule, that we can meet with the students, and . . . we want to guarantee they make it through . . . to become tenth graders.”

Jenkins and Smullen’s appeals suggested that the associative force of Stevenson served as an indicator of the program’s worth that unclear assessments of student performance in the program could not provide. Allusions to repeated encounters with Stevenson implied that Beloit administrators had not yet calibrated their practices with this exemplar—but they would, and success would follow. However, this association could not eliminate the possibility of an alternative judgment, which was confirmed by the board’s decision to terminate funding for New Directions. In the case of New Directions, the allure of achievement could not outweigh concerns about ineffectiveness; in this instance, technical considerations proved more decisive than the community-embraced value of achievement. Even so, Thompson responded to the school board’s vote to terminate the program with assurances that the Stevenson-like strategies developed for New Directions would be implemented elsewhere in the curriculum.

The Stevenson model departed from NCLB’s prescriptions in three respects. First, it did not adhere to the clinical model of education research that NCLB privileged. It offered instead applied research practices and models for emulation. Second, while it guided the development of policy proposals, it did not provide exact answers for how those models should be implemented in *Beloit*. Stevenson reflected the need, unaccounted for in NCLB, to adapt research to a particular district’s constraints and values. Third, it illustrated how the engagement of research may function as an epistemological practice. The ambiguity of Stevenson as a source created an opportunity to consider policy proposals that reflected shared values and expectations without foreclosing debate. Stevenson demonstrated how the meaning of a research reference emerged within a cultural context that may sustain disagreement on policy while providing the grounds for shared visions.

The Struggle Over the Meaning of Research

The particular meaning of research takes its shape from the context in which it circulates, which can contribute to productive and unproductive outcomes. To be sure, disagreement frequently characterized the school-board meetings we observed, but interlocutors did not contest the meaning of research very often. However, in one case a prolonged debate over the meaning of research highlighted the difficulties of referencing research as well as tensions attending confident proclamations of research findings. In spring and summer 2010 in West Bend, board members became involved in a rancorous debate over whether the district should implement a voluntary program of four-year-old kindergarten. Professing a focus on education, board members disagreed about whether the research had judged such programs a success, but they nevertheless tied this research

to disagreements over the socializing role of the family and the comparative financial obligations of individuals and the community.

The conflict over 4K mainly took place between two members of the board’s subcommittee on instruction. Opposing the program, Dave Weigand, who had campaigned on a fiscally conservative platform, recently had been elected to the board as part of a community reaction against an unpopular increase in the district’s tax levy the previous fall. Although district leaders argued that increasing student populations and diminishing state support justified the increase, vocal local residents—spurred, in part, by coverage of the levy proposal on local talk radio—responded that the district had been living beyond its means and that district leaders failed to recognize the tenuous financial situations of many families in the district. Kris Beaver, a long-serving board member and a teacher, favored the proposal presently and during the rancorous previous fall, believing that even in an economic downturn the district needed to fulfill its basic obligation to fund education.

Debating the likely efficacy of 4K, Weigand and Beaver expressed a desire to stay focused on educational issues. “This is not about money,” Beaver argued, “This is about educating kids.” Likewise, Weigand reminded other committee members that “we can’t be all things to all people. . . . We’re in the business of educating.” With this avowed focus, Weigand and Beaver disagreed about the research on 4K. Weigand insisted that the early education produced only temporary benefits: “The studies don’t show that it’s a permanent, um, permanent thing. . . . By the time you hit third grade, the studies, and you’ve pointed this out, the studies show that they’re the same.” Beaver retorted that the research actually confirmed the benefits of 4K—maintaining that although students’ skills eventually leveled off, they did so at a higher benchmark because of the earlier

intervention. Moreover, Beaver questioned whether Weigand understood the research. In an unusually confrontational move, he queried repeatedly: “Do you understand the educational argument? I’m not asking if you agree with it. I’m saying do you understand the educational argument for it?” Weigand did not back down, reiterating that “studies have shown that it’s not, that it does even out.”

Both Weigand and Beaver appealed to research, but their appeals produced unresolved disagreements about the potential success of a 4K program. This lack of a resolution stemmed importantly from their reliance on what the “research says.” Neither Weigand nor Beaver specifically cited research—both board members relied on their memory of research they had encountered. Consequently, neither board member made clear whether the research had addressed 4K or Head Start programs, or where they had encountered this research, as in, for example, an academic venue or a news media account.

Here, too, ambiguity served a crucial role in the direction the debate took. In the second of two meetings on the subject, Weigand reaffirmed his opposition: “Uh, I, and I’ve stated my objections last, last month, and the studies are very ambivalent, you know. We can agree to that. But you have studies that show that there’s a benefit. You have studies that show there is no benefit.” In particular, he asserted an even split in the scholarship, even though he did not share any findings: “Half the studies show that it’s, improves, half show that it does not, or actually a detriment.” Similarly, in the second meeting, Beaver indicated that he had done some homework. Having read “a bunch of research,” he learned that “the research I read does point to the fact that a good pre-kindergarten program does raise the levels of skills and abilities beyond, um, what they would normally be at.”

Operating at the level of “research says,” neither Weigand nor Beaver could engage the

other’s evidence. Instead, each continued to reiterate their positions, with Weigand regarding “leveling off” as a sign of failure and Beaver seeing it as an indication of success.

Yet their focus on education research did not hold—even as Weigand and Beaver announced it—functioning instead as a *proxy for values*. In their initial discussion of the 4K program, just before he argued that research attributed a temporary benefit to early education, Weigand described his disagreement with Beaver as “a worldview difference, probably.” Ideology—not the value-neutral conclusions of research—informed their debate. Moreover, even as he reminded his colleagues that their business was education not parenting, Weigand maintained that “we want to encourage the parents in their responsibility of educating their kids.” In this vein, he insisted that “the best option [for young children] is to be at home with their mom or their family.” Instituting a program of 4K education relieved parents of their responsibility to raise their children, improperly shifting the burden onto the community. He objected that “it’s shifting the, the funding from the individual parent to now the collective property of the taxpayer.” Further, while working parents might place their children outside of the home already, 4K education would act as an improper inducement for others. In these ways, arguments about finances and family both subordinated research to the value of personal responsibility: parents should raise their children, and if they choose not to, they should not expect the community to pay for childcare.

Beaver agreed that ideally young children should be raised by parents at home, but he called attention to what he saw as the reality of different familial circumstances. Recalling his mother’s vocation as a teacher, Beaver observed that “there’s a lot of moms out there and a lot of dads, a lot of parents in general, single moms, single dads, parents

who don't have the level of education that I was fortunate that my mother had.” These students began their formal education at a disadvantage, learning less than students with engaged and knowledgeable parents. Beaver charged the school district with remedying these deficiencies, which would benefit all students by enabling teachers to address more advanced material. In this way, Beaver elevated the value of community in contrast to Weigand's championing of the individual. From Beaver's perspective, when an individual parent failed to prepare one's child, the community needed to intervene. This dichotomy of values—individual versus community responsibility—also informed their disagreement over finances, as Weigand entrusted the individual and private sector with fiscal responsibility, while Beaver regarded early education as a public and community responsibility.

In important respects, invocations of research frustrated efforts to address this disagreement directly, since disagreements over what the research said transfigured a debate over aims and purposes into an ostensibly technical debate about efficacy. To the extent to which the debate retained this focus, Beaver maintained a strategic advantage, since he needed only to demonstrate potential success in the absence of alternative considerations that might outweigh efficacy. Conceding the ideal quality of parents caring for young children, Beaver nevertheless sought a clear finding from the research—questioning his interlocutor's competency as the basis of their different interpretations of research—to frame their debate. In contrast, ambiguous research findings bolstered Weigand's position by suggesting that they needed to consider family and finances, since research did not speak clearly on this issue. Yet vague references to research prevented both board members from explicitly evaluating connections between efficacy and the aims

and purposes of the district’s educational mission, thus exacerbating rather than addressing their disagreement.

Our point is not that Weigand and Beaver would have resolved their disagreement had they removed their ideological blinders and paid more careful attention to research. Although their disagreement exhibited some political themes prominent in contemporary American political culture (e.g., individual v. community), neither board member should be reduced to a political stereotype. Quite the contrary, both board members self-identified as conservatives serving an especially conservative community. Disagreeing within a shared ideological framework, Weigand and Beaver embodied the complexity of the value differences among diverse constituencies that board members confront on an everyday basis. Along these lines, Weigand represented his election victory as part of a populist movement against a perceived elitism displayed by administrators and members of the previous board, casting Beaver as a member of the old regime. Their disagreement also arose from their different roles in the community. As a teacher, even as a conservative, Beaver had a different perception of the value of early education than Weigand. Perhaps closer engagement with the specifics of the research may have helped them judge efficacy more clearly, but efficacy, too, must be considered in context. And research on 4k programs does not necessarily address the perceived hardships of a community experiencing an economic downturn. Whereas NCLB imagines that research settles education policy, the debate over 4k programs in West Bend shows how research may unsettle education policy.

Conclusion

Key policy terms connect and distinguish forums of policy debate. In this spirit, federal policymakers invoked “research” as a basis for education policy, which they hoped would offer uniform standards for judging school success and failure while avoiding partisan conflict. However, the invocation of this term raised as many questions as policymakers sought to answer, including whether local officials would employ research as evidence and how they would regard research as meaningful. Our analysis shows that federal law propagated a narrow definition of research and a correspondingly narrow model of decision-making. In contrast, school-board members, administrators, and others articulated a wide view of research, and their deliberations appreciated the need to balance technical considerations against the needs, interests, and values of their communities.

As our reference to balance suggests, we maintain that technical forms of evidence may play important roles in public decision-making. Indeed, we see utility in all six of the evidence types we discerned in the school-board meetings—research, experience, examples, testimony, data, and law/policy—and we hold that none should be privileged as intrinsically more illuminating. Decisions about which evidence types to use and when to use them should be made with regard to the question an advocate seeks to answer. Research evidence constitutes as an inventional resource that may spur, rather than foreclose, deliberation. Moreover, advocates may combine various evidence types to promote stronger resonance with their arguments among diverse audiences. Superintendent Milt Thompson pursued this strategy in Beloit, pairing research with examples or experience when advancing technical claims. Some interlocutors responded by praising Thompson’s inclusive deliberative style.

Research also may benefit public deliberation when advocates share important details and contextualize this type of evidence. When ambiguity frustrated the deliberations of the school boards in our study, it often did so because participants did not inquire about claims of “research says,” leaving these pronouncements to stand unchallenged as authoritative renderings of consensual expert knowledge. Inquiries need not mirror the review process of a scholarly journal, but participants in public debates may ask for additional information about key questions, populations studied, and other relevant factors when confronted with assertions of the “research says.” Seeking this sort of information would enable local decision-makers to draw connections between research and perceived problems and issues in their communities. Although education researchers trained in the social sciences may appreciate the power of generalization, the school board members and others cited in our study engaged more extensively with research that they regarded as speaking directly to the issues they faced in Beloit, Elmbrook, and West Bend. This consideration, too, points to the need to contextualize claims about research. Contextualization should address not only locales, but perspectives and normative frameworks that inform the conduct, circulation, and reception of research. As the debate over 4k education in West Bend suggests, acknowledging different “worldviews” may not resolve disagreement, but elucidating more fully the basis of disagreement may promote perspective-taking more readily than NCLB’s effort to prescribe a narrow model of decision-making. Adopting a more expansive deliberative model may enable scholars to understand how local officials enact public policy according to their own visions of the appropriate grounds and authorities of argument.

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