Parental Trigger Laws and the Power of Framing in Educational Politics

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Abstract: This paper examines the discursive strategies employed by advocates of Parent Trigger laws in the United States which allow parents of children in "failing" schools, in some states, to call for interventions in the operation of the schools via petition. The paper reviews the genesis of Parent Trigger laws, the network of conservative political organizations supporting Parent Trigger legislation, and the ways in which Parent Trigger advocates have promoted the concept through the deployment of both material and symbolic resources. The paper argues that Parent Trigger laws promote a "thin" form of democratic participation that equates democracy with consumer choice through the strategic representation of public schools as broken institutions and parent trigger laws as empowering parents to choose. Support for this position is developed through an empirical qualitative analysis of a sample of media texts produced by various organizations within the Parent Trigger policy network including the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), American Enterprise Institute, Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, and others. By identifying frequently used framing devices such as metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, and depictions as well as reasoning devices such as root causes, consequences, and appeals to principle, the study reveals the dominant frames employed by Parent Trigger advocates and contributes to the development of a more critical perspective concerning the media produced by various interest groups.
Keywords: School reform; neoliberalism; educational politics; framing; discourse analysis; interest groups; school choice; educational policy

Legislación "Iniciativa de los Padres" y el Poder de los Marcos Discursivos en las Políticas Educativas

Resumen: Este artículo examina las estrategias discursivas empleadas por los defensores de las leyes estadounidenses conocidas como "Parent Trigger Laws" (leyes de gatillos de los padres), que en algunos estados permiten intervenir en el funcionamiento de las escuelas mediante petición de los padres. En este artículo se examina la aparición de las leyes Parent Trigger, la red de organizaciones políticas conservadoras que apoyan la legislación Parent Trigger, y de qué maneras sus defensores han promovido el concepto mediante el uso de recursos materiales y simbólicos. En este artículo se argumenta que las leyes Parent Trigger promueven una forma "fina" de participación democrática, que define como equivalentes democracia y elección del consumidor, empleando para ello la representación estratégica de las escuelas públicas como instituciones no funcionales, y presenta las leyes Parent Trigger como herramientas que dan a los padres el poder para elegir. Esta posición se ve respaldada por un análisis empírico cualitativo de una muestra de textos mediáticos producidos por varias organizaciones que forman parte de la red de políticas de legislación Parent Trigger, como American Legislative Exchange Council, ALEC, American Enterprise Institute, Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, y otras instituciones. Al identificar los sistemas de representación más utilizados, como metáforas, ejemplos, lemas y representaciones, así como sistemas de razonamiento como causa raíz, consecuencias, y apelar a principios, este estudio revela los marcos discursivos más utilizados por los defensores de leyes Parent Trigger, y contribuye al desarrollo de una perspectiva más crítica sobre los medios producidos por varios grupos de interés.
Palabras-clave: Reforma escolar; neoliberalismo; política educativa; marco discursivo; análisis discursivo; grupos de interés; elección escolar; política educativa

Legislação "Iniciativa dos Pais" e o Poder dos Marcos Discursivos nas Politicas Educativas

Resumo: Este artigo examina as estratégias discursivas empregues pelos apoiantes das leis Parent Trigger (leis de "iniciativa" dos pais) nos Estados Unidos que permitem aos pais das crianças em escolas com 'pouco sucesso', em alguns estados, pedirem por intervenções na operação das escolas através de uma petição. O artigo revê a génese das leis Parent Trigger, a rede de organizações políticas conservativas apoiantes da legislação Parent Trigger e as formas em como os apoiantes das Parent Trigger promoveram o conceito através da distribuição de recursos materiais e simbólicos. O artigo defende que as leis Parent Trigger promovem uma forma "leve" de participação democrática que equilibra a democracia com a escolha do consumidor através da representação estratégica de escolas públicas como instituições com falhas e as leis Parent Trigger como dando o poder aos pais para escolherem. O apoio para esta posição é desenvolvido através de uma análise qualitativa empírica de uma amostra de textos media produzidos por várias organizações dentro da rede da política Parent Trigger incluindo o American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), American Enterprise Institute, Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution e outras. Ao identificar métodos de enquadramento frequentemente utilizados como metáforas, exemplos, frases-chave e representações, assim como métodos de raciocínio como causas-raiz, consequências e apelos aos princípios, o estudo revela que os enquadramentos dominantes empregues pelas Parent Triger apoiam e contribuem para o desenvolvimento de uma perspetiva mais crítica no que diz respeito aos media produzidos pelos vários grupos de interesse.
Palavras-chave: Reforma da escola; neoliberalismo; educação política; enquadramento; análise de discurso; grupos de interesse; escolha da escola; política educacional

Introduction

Since 2010, seven states (California, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Connecticut, and Texas) have enacted "Parental Trigger" laws of various types (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013). These laws target schools that have been labeled "failing" due to low test scores over a period of two or three years and allow parents of children in these schools to call for interventions in the operation of the school via petition. Responses to successful petitions, usually requiring at least half of the parents with children in the school to sign, include one or more of the following: closing the school; reconstituting the school (meaning replacement of all staff and faculty); providing the students with private school vouchers; or converting the school into a charter school (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013).

According to the National Conference of State Legislators (2013), there have been a total of twenty five states that have actively considered passing Parent Trigger legislation as of March 2013 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013). There has even been a Hollywood film "Won't Back Down," released in September of 2012, featuring parent activists seeking to transform a school using the Parent Trigger mechanism. Though only two communities have exercised the Parent Trigger option thus far, the development of these laws is a reflection of the growing strength of neoliberal rationality in the realm of school reform(Redden, 2012).

According to Harvey (2007) the term "neoliberalism" refers to that body of ideas and policies supportive of economic deregulation and the dismantling of the public sector based on the belief that competition and choice within a market framework is the best mechanism to enhance human well-being and economic efficiency. The link between neoliberalism and Parent Trigger legislation is most obvious with respect to the options within the law aimed at establishing greater choice for parents and families. These include providing students with vouchers and converting traditional public schools to charter schools. However, the other options in the law – closing schools and reconstituting schools – also adhere to a market logic which suggests that schools are largely interchangeable and ought to be allowed to go out of business in the same way as stores and factories.

To some degree, the neoliberal thrust of Parent Trigger legislation is hidden behind what appears to be a grassroots movement seeking to radically democratize public education by placing greater decision-making authority in the hands of parents. For example, for parents frustrated with their children's educational experiences Parent Trigger laws appear to provide a clear avenue for participation and influence. However, when the opportunities for input are limited to a single petition campaign, and the changes that will occur are limited to options such as school closings, or charter school conversion, the impact may actually decrease the democratic character of school governance. Stitzlein (2015) draws a similar conclusion, noting that Parent Trigger laws provide limited influence for parents, because they focus on a single moment of influence rather than the development of ongoing mechanisms for participation in school governance. In addition, circumventing more traditional forms of school governance, such as school boards, in order to implement reforms focused on markets and competition may actually disenfranchise important community stakeholders such as individuals without children, or those whose children are no longer in school, who rely on regularly held school board elections to voice their perspectives.

The Parent Trigger movement has been strongly supported by a variety of conservative political organizations including the Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, the Walton Family Foundation, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which has created model legislation for states to follow (Lubienski, Scott, Rogers, & Welner, 2012). Arguably, these

organizations have promoted Parent Trigger policies because they align with their views related to public education.

Given the threat to traditional public education embodied in the Parent Trigger movement, this paper seeks to examine the ways that groups like ALEC, Parent Revolution, and others have framed their cause in order to generate support for their neoliberal agenda. The frames used by "frame sponsors," such as the interest groups mentioned above are often revealed in press releases, pamphlets, and brochures (Van Gorp, 2009, p. 94). For this analysis, I have examined a broad selection of public statements and texts related to Parent Trigger produced by a core set of these groups (ALEC, American Enterprise Institute, Democrats For Educational Reform, Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, Stand for Children, Students First, and the Walton Family Foundation) in order to determine the dominant frames used to promote their interests. By revealing the dominant frames embedded in the media texts produced by Parent Trigger advocates, this paper contributes to the development of a more critical perspective concerning the media produced by various interest groups.

I begin this paper with a review the genesis of Parent Trigger laws, the current players in the policy network supporting Parent Trigger legislation, and the major discursive strategies employed by these groups. Next, I introduce the theoretical foundation supporting the framing analysis employed in this paper and the various elements that compose a typical media frame. Following this explanation, I describe the media sample used for this study and the types of documents that were analyzed. In the ensuing analysis, I examine the dominant frames found in the texts created by the frame sponsors and provide examples illustrating the characteristics of each frame. The conclusion of the paper considers the potential ways these frames may shape the public's perception of both traditional public schools and the Parent Trigger option. Central to this discussion is the potential for Parent Trigger laws to diminish the democratic quality of public education by narrowing the definition of "public" used to determine who gets to decide matters of educational policy.

Context of the Parent Trigger

Genesis of the Parent Trigger

Parent Trigger laws now being implemented in many states can be understood as a new development in the broader charter school reform movement. This movement, which began in the 1980s as a way to provide greater flexibility in the education of poor and minority students (Fabricant & Fine, 2012), has developed into a robust effort to provide new educational choices to students and parents who might be dissatisfied with their traditional public schools. Charter schools are commonly understood to be public schools that are formed by groups of individuals, or organizations, that operate under the terms of a contract or "charter." Typically these schools are freed from many of the regulations that govern traditional public schools (e.g. some proportion of teachers in the school may not need to be state certified). Students are able to apply to charter schools for admission, which is often administered through a lottery process.

Charter schools have risen in popularity over time. According to National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), there are approximately 6,400 charter school serving 2.57 million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014b). While this number is still relatively small in relation to the overall number of students attending traditional public schools (over 54 million school age children attended public school in the United States in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), the number of charters has grown by approximately 300% since 2000-2001(National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014b). In addition to this rapid expansion, charters are popular with the American public. The 46th annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools indicates that 70% of the American public, and 62%

of public school parents, favor the idea of charter schools(Bushaw & Calderon, 2014). School districts in cities such as New Orleans, Washington DC, and Detroit have seen significant growth in the number of students attending charter schools; large percentages of students in these districts (91%, 55%, and 44% respectively) now attend charter schools(National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014a).

Despite the popularity of the charter school concept, a growing body of evidence suggests that only a portion of charter schools perform better than traditional public schools, and that the majority perform the same or worse (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2009; Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). It is also true that charter school enrollment accounts for less than 5% of overall public school enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Thus, while interest in charter schools has clearly grown, and there has been intense coverage of charter schools in the mainstream media (Henig, 2008; Jones, Thomas, & Wolfe, 2014), traditional public schools continue to educate a vast majority of school age children in the United States.

Traditional public schools have been the focus of a constant stream of criticism in recent years; much of it generated by various government commissions. According to Ravitch (2013), beginning with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, discourse about public education has focused on the failings of the system to adequately prepare American youth for the world of work and for competition in the global economy. This criticism has been central to media coverage of public education since the 1980s and support for traditional public schools has decreased over time. Citing Jones (2012), who examined historical data from the Gallup Poll, Ravitch (2013) reports that the percentage of Americans confident in our schools has dropped from 58% in 1973 to 29% in 2012.[1]

Concerns about public school decline often focus on issues of quality and effectiveness. With regard to quality, many reports have focused on the performance of American schools within the international context suggesting that, "students in the United States now, on average, perform substantially below students in a number of Asian countries, including Japan, South Korea, and the regions of China where assessments have occurred" (Morgan & Poppe, 2012). In terms of effectiveness, public schools are also critiqued for their inability to close the gap between the performance of poor and minority students and their White middle class peers. Blame for this "performance gap" often minimizes the differences in resources that exist among the schools serving these different populations, and instead focuses on teachers and their unions. For example, teachers' unions are often presented as impediments to reform because they are viewed as being protective of poor teachers (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Watkins, 2011). Much blame for poor student performance is also reserved for school boards, which are depicted as unresponsive to parental interests (Lubienski et al., 2012).

In response to these concerns, a network of educational advocacy organizations such as Parent Revolution, the Walton Family Foundation, Heartland Institute, Stand for Education, Students First, the American Enterprise Institute, and others, have worked in parallel to develop and promote Parent Trigger legislation. This legislation creates a way for parents of children in low-performing schools to take control of the school if they are able to gather the signatures of 51 percent of the current parents (Ravitch, 2013). Once in control, parents can then select their favored reform from among the pre-determined options noted earlier.

Parent Trigger laws can be viewed as an extension of the broader charter school movement because they provide a mechanism to convert traditional public schools into charter schools in areas

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[1] Despite this criticism, Ravitch (2013) emphasizes that the aggregate performance of public schools actually improved during this period. Specifically, overall graduation rates from public schools are quite high (78.2%) (p. 75) and NAEP

where charters have been unable to establish themselves via other means. Although transforming traditional public schools into charter schools is only one of the possible outcomes of a successful Parent Trigger petition, some form of charter implementation has been the only outcome selected by the two communities who have exercised the Parent Trigger option thus far.[2]

Considering the popularity of charter schools and the advent of "Parent Trigger" laws, it is useful to understand more about the network of groups now supporting this reform effort. The following section provides some background on these groups and illustrates some of the linkages among them.
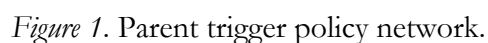
The Players

As mentioned earlier, there is a fairly lengthy list of organizations that have been involved in developing and disseminating the Parent Trigger concept. The relations among and between these philanthropies, think tanks, interest groups, individuals, and government entities are complex and difficult to characterize. According to Au and Ferrare (2014) neoliberal policy networks composed of corporations, non-profits, and philanthropies have greatly increased their influence in educational governance in recent years through the development of network governance strategies. These strategies have focused on using both material resources such as campaign contributions and funding, and symbolic resources such as foundation sponsored research and endorsements, to support policies that stress the values of competition, deregulation, and markets.

Parent Trigger legislation can be considered a product of the type of neoliberal policy network described by Au and Ferrare (2014) above. Many of the individuals and groups composing the network supporting Parent Trigger legislation depicted in Figure 1 (below) share common funding sources and promote similar political and social ideas. More generally, according to Kumashiro (2008), these kinds of organizations share a commitment to "dismantling any aspect of government that reflects a welfare state, particularly such big budget items as health care and education" (p. 16).

Three of the most prominent funders in the educational policy arena – the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad foundation, and Walton Family Foundation – were all supporters of Parent Revolution, the group that claims authorship of the first Parent Trigger legislation (Barkan, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). Within this group, the Walton Family Foundation itself has directly promoted the Parent Trigger option and other "parent empowerment" efforts (Walton Family Foundation, 2013). In addition, the Walton Family Foundation is a key funder of the Heartland Institute, a conservative think-tank supported by Charles and David Koch and others who are well known for their support of libertarian and conservative causes (Barkan, 2011).

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[2] In Adelanto, California, an elementary school has been reopened as a charter because of a successful Parent Trigger Petition, and in Los Angeles, California a charter school operator is running grades 5-8 in an otherwise traditional public school (Bidwell, 2013).

Figure 1. Parent trigger policy network.

The Heartland Institute has also supported Parent Trigger legislation and drafted its own version of the law (Bast, Behrend, Boychuk, & Oestreich, 2010; Ravitch, 2013). This model legislation was adopted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an organization that works with state legislators and corporate leaders to create model laws that can later be introduced in the legislators' home states (Ravitch, 2013). Supported by the Koch brothers and the Gates Foundation, ALEC makes clear on its website that it promotes a variety of neoliberal values including "principles of free markets, limited government, federalism, and individual liberty" (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2013; Barkan , 2013).

Other organizations, such as the American Enterprise Institute – one of the nation's oldest conservative think tanks – has written extensively about how to mobilize parents to advocate for educational reforms, including the Parent Trigger (McGuin & Kelly, 2012). Similarly, Michelle Rhee's Students First advocacy organization has promoted Parent Trigger as a way to "provide parents with a new tool to influence and demand change in the type of education their children receive and deserve" (Students First, 2013). Other groups, such as Democrats for Educational

Reform (DFER), a group supported by a number of corporate hedge fund managers, and the US Conference of Mayors, have also supported Parent Trigger (Ravitch, 2013, U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2012). Support for Parent Trigger laws has also come from organizations such as Walden Media, owned by conservative billionaire Philip Anschutz. Walden Media produced the film "Won't Back Down" in 2012, which promoted the Parent Trigger concept (Cavanagh, 2012).

Together, the individuals and organizations composing this neoliberal policy network have promoted the benefits of choice and competition in education. In addition, this network has sought to side step the traditional system of educational governance that relied on entities such as school boards and state education associations to govern public education and focused on gaining control through the use of petition. Some of the prominent strategies used by the entities composing this policy network to influence the nature of public education are discussed below.

Strategies

The strategies used by the individuals and groups composing this neoliberal policy network are both traditional and symbolic. Traditional political tactics include community organizing to assist with petition drives and motivating change by leveraging investments in order to amplify their effect. Symbolic strategies involve the development of reports and other public media aimed at influencing the way the general public might view a particular issue. In this paper, I refer to these efforts to shape meaning as "discursive strategies."

With respect to traditional political tactics, Marsh and Wohlstetter (2013) suggest that the current economic crisis has created new opportunities for influence from well-funded foundations and philanthropies. For example, Barkan (2013) estimates that about $1 billion is spent by "big philanthropy" each year to influence public education. These philanthropists "give their money to grantees who agree to adopt policies favored by the foundation. Resource-starved states and school districts feel compelled to say yes to millions of dollars even when many strings are attached" (Barkan, 2013, p. 5). By offering grants and awards to public schools and other supporting institutions, foundations like Gates, Broad, and Walton are able to multiply the effect of their gifts by creating competition for the funds.

In terms of discursive strategies, the groups which compose the policy networks now supporting Parent Trigger legislation have developed similar ways of referring to public education and school reform that make their agenda appear desirable despite its potential drawbacks. They do so by emphasizing the benefits of parental control and choice while minimizing the potential threat such ideas pose to the democratic control of public schooling. Adopting this language means that reformers end up discussing solutions to educational problems in terms that emphasize efficiency, standardization, and competitiveness rather than terms that focus on cooperation, equity, and social justice.

An example of a neoliberal policy network in action is provided by Au and Ferrare (2014) who studied the role of wealthy individuals and philanthropies in passing legislation that allowed charter schools to be established in Washington State in 2012. These authors documented the various material and symbolic resources provided by individuals such as Bill Gates, Alice Walton, and Eli Broad, and others, and their organizations in order to leverage support for their preferred policy. The findings of their study illustrate the outsized influence of a small number of individuals and organizations in the political process and raise important questions about the "disproportionate power of super wealthy individuals and their related philanthropic organizations relative to public education policy and the democratic decision-making process of individual voters" (Au & Ferrare, 2014, p. 19). Because these policy networks are not public entities and have no mechanisms for public oversight, it is important to understand more about the ways in which the individuals and groups of which they are composed exert influence.

Such insights can be developed by examining the ways that various groups within the Parent Trigger policy network (described above) frame their positions. By studying their reports, publications, and websites, it is possible to identify the most typical portrayals of educational concerns, and gain new insights into the prevailing values and ideologies informing their positions. While traditional political tactics remain an important area of investigation, this study focuses on the discursive strategies employed by groups within the neoliberal policy network seeking to build support for Parent Trigger legislation.

Theoretical Framework

Political actors including individuals, interest groups, policy advocates, social movements, policy networks, corporations, and governments have always sought to shape political reality by influencing the "perceptions, preferences, or actions" of other actors (Manheim, 2011, p. 18). Such shaping, notes Manheim (2011), occurs through the strategic application of "complex, longitudinal acts of communication – exchanges of information designed to accomplish a specific objective" (p. 19). These communication efforts, sometimes referred to as "information and influence" campaigns, are undertaken in an effort to encourage a particular actor or actors to adopt or resist changes driven by competing campaigns, or by other shifts in the political or economic environment (Manheim, 2011). To motivate action, political actors must convince other individuals or groups that particular issues are problematic and deserving of a public response. Such efforts to motivate political action are central to the debates over Parent Trigger laws.

Within typical influence and issue campaigns advocates seek to strategically represent their interests in ways that resonate with their target audience. Such representations typically position the protagonist as aligned with or sympathetic to the interest of the target audience, though occasionally advocates will also stress their power to impose costs on members of those audiences who do not cooperate (Manheim, 2011). When advocates compete with each another, they are often seeking to assign blame for various problems to their competitors while simultaneously representing themselves as problem solvers with the knowledge and resources necessary to address issues of concern. According to Stone (1989), political actors use "narrative storylines and symbolic devices to manipulate so-called issue characteristics, all the while making it seem as though they are simply describing facts" (p. 282). Successful storylines are able to uphold their claims in the face of challenges, and may eventually come to be seen as part of the natural order of things.

Similarly, Manheim (2011) suggests that contests among advocates seeking to define issues and their consequences can be thought of as "a complicated and protracted morality play" (p. 24), in which groups struggle to define who is good and who is evil. From the perspective of those consuming the media produced by political actors, making such distinctions about good and evil is not a simple matter. Such judgments are typically influenced by dominant social values, the material and symbolic resources available to the advocates, and the overall effectiveness of the messaging or framing that they choose to employ.

In terms of dominant social values, it is useful to consider the rise of neoliberal thinking over the past quarter century as an example of the influence political values can have on educational policy. According to Hursh (2007) and Harvey (2007), over the last 25 years, neoliberalism, which stresses the privatization of goods and services, has risen to prominence, while older social democratic principles have fallen out of favor. Comparing social democratic values with neoliberal values illustrates a change in the way the role of the state is conceived in relation to private interests. Whereas social democratic values emphasized the importance of the state in managing economic inequality and poverty through the provision of public services such as education and health care,

neoliberal values emphasize privatization and promote markets and competition as the best way to foster personal responsibility, innovation, and efficiency (Harvey, 2007).

Along these lines, many of the groups and individuals supporting the Parent Trigger concept promote it as a strategy to disrupt the traditional model of public education by offering vouchers, charters, reconstitution, or even closure in place of "failing" public schools. As a symbol, the notion of "failing" public schools is quite powerful and lays a foundation for action to address the failure. Neoliberalism, which values increased competition and choice, provides what appears to be an easy and non-political way to address the supposed failure of public schools; allow parents to make choices and the invisible hand of the market will drive improvement. In this instance, the logic linking choice with improvement focuses on the role of competition in spurring market-innovation and improved efficiency. If such benefits are common in the market for private goods and services, choice advocates argue, competition among public institutions should yield similar outcomes.

According to Saltman (2012), powerful symbolic language related to the benefits of the market is also used by market advocates to equate consumer choice with practice of democracy. One of the primary strategies used to accomplish the shift from public to private, notes Saltman (2012) is to "treat the use of public resources as 'shopping' by 'consumers' (p. 32). Such an approach establishes "the public sector as a market – as a natural, politically neutral entity ruled by the laws of supply and demand rather than as a matter of public priority, political deliberation, and competing values and visions" (p. 32). Beder (2006) holds a similar perspective, noting that business leaders have equated individual political freedom with "the freedom to choose goods and a job" (p. 8), and "call consumer choice 'consumer democracy' and equate it with political democracy" (p. 8). According to Hursh (2007), equating consumer choice with democracy leads to a situation where voting can be viewed as an act of private consumption, and democracy becomes little more than the "tallying of individual preferences" (p. 513).

Importantly, with respect to the focus of this investigation, equating consumer choice with democracy provides an example of the kind discursive move that policy advocates often employ in their efforts to influence targets' beliefs, preferences, and/or behaviors. Efforts such as these, aimed at influencing public opinion, often rely on subtle transformations to the form and content of communication. In this regard, political communication can be understood as the strategic representation of issues. Such representations are strategic in the sense that political actors base them on their knowledge of the intended the audience and construct them to achieve particular outcomes.

An important element in the strategic representation of issues is the concept of framing. "In effect" writes Manheim (2011), "a frame conveys an explanatory and/or emotional context in which the audience is encouraged, intentionally or otherwise, to view or understand the issue in question" (p. 59). Any given frame emphasizes particular elements of reality and deemphasizes others. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1987), frames help to provide meaning to observed events, and repeated exposure to particular frames will influence the way that particular issues are interpreted.

In order to effectively frame an issue, political communication usually employs one or more of the following features: metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, depictions, root causes, consequences, and appeals to principle (Gamson & Lasch, 1981). Together, these features constitute what Gamson and Lasch (1981) called an interpretive package. In Gamson and Lasch's (1981) view, interpretive packages help to shape public narratives and understandings about various issues through their resonance with dominant social values. The elements of a particular interpretive package include both framing devices (which provide the structure of the narrative) and reasoning devices (which provide additional justification and analysis). These two frame elements work together to create meaning. Table A below summarizes the frame elements described by Gamson

and Lasch (1981). Determining the how these frame elements operate within the media texts produced by various organizations within the Parent Trigger policy network is the primary aim of this investigation.

Table 1
Elements of the Frame Package

	Frame Element	Description
Framing Devices	Metaphors	Link two concepts together. Provides a mental model of events and experiences by linking them with associated subjects (see Van Dijk, 1995, p. 252)
	Exemplars	Representative instances recalled from the past or present that are meant to characterize the current situation
	Catch-phrases	Slogans or single theme statements used to sum up the issue or situation
	Depictions and Visual Images	The way an issue is represented with descriptors and adjectives. Can also include the way images or symbols are presented
Reasoning Devices	Root Causes	Causal narratives or stories that assign blame, praise, or take credit for particular situations or issues
	Consequences	Extent or predicted outcomes under discussion
	Appeals to Principle	Moral appeals and references to various values such as equity, efficiency, choice, and quality

Note. Table 1 based on Gamson and Lasch (1981).

In the following section, I describe methodology employed to identify and characterize the dominant frames used by Parent Trigger advocates within the broader debate over Parent Trigger laws.

Methodology

This study was designed to identify and characterize the dominant frames used by Parent Trigger advocates in their support for Parent Trigger legislation. In order to investigate these frames, I have followed a methodology built upon the work of Gamson (1981), Van Gorp (2010) and others which focuses on the qualitative analysis of media communications in order to identify the frame elements summarized in Table 1 (above) and how those frame elements are combined in order to shape meaning.

To carry out such an analysis, I identified a sample of media communications associated with a subset of the various advocacy groups belonging to the Parent Trigger policy network described at the beginning of this paper and represented in Figure 1 (above). These communications came from public statements, position papers, websites, and other documents created by these various groups. More specifically, I examined texts associated with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, Students First, Democrats for Educational Reform, and the Walton Family Foundation. I selected documents with an explicit focus on the Parent Trigger concept for analysis. A list of the specific texts that served as the focus of analysis follows in Table 2 (below).

Table 2
Organizations and Texts Analyzed

Name of Organization	Title of text(s) or web page(s) included in analysis	URL
American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)	Report Card on American Education 18th Edition	http://www.alec.org/publications/report-card-on-american-education/
	Parent Trigger Act	http://www.alec.org/model-legislation/parent-trigger-act/
American Enterprise Institute	Putting the Punch in Parent Power	http://www.aei.org/outlook/education/k-12/putting-the-punch-in-parent-power/
	Parent Power: Grass-Roots Activism and K-12 Education Reform	http://www.aei.org/papers/education/k-12/parent-power-grass-roots-activism-and-k-12-education-reform/
Heartland Institute	The "Parent Trigger" in California: Some Lessons from the Experience So Far	http://heartland.org/policy-documents/parent-trigger-california-some-lessons-experience-so-far
	The Parent Trigger: Justification and Design Guidelines	http://heartland.org/sites/default/files/11-01-12_parent_trigger_justification_and_design_guidelines.pdf
	The Parent Trigger: A Model for Transforming Education	http://heartland.org/policy-documents/parent-trigger-model-transforming-education
	Freedom Rising 7 Big Ideas for Congress	http://heartland.org/policy-documents/freedom-rising-7-big-ideas-congress
	The Parent Trigger (website)	http://theparenttrigger.com/
	Model Bill: The Parent Trigger	http://heartland.org/policy-documents/model-bill-parent-trigger
Parent Revolution	Basic Overview	http://parentrevolution.org/content/basic-overview
	Getting Started	http://parentrevolution.org/content/getting-started
	Model Legislation	http://parentrevolution.org/content/model-legislation
	Parent Power Handbook	http://parentrevolution.org/content/parent-power-handbook
	Passing the Parent Trigger	http://parentrevolution.org/content/passing-parent-trigger
	Turnaround Options	http://parentrevolution.org/content/turnaround-options

Table 2 (cont'd.)
Organizations and Texts Analyzed

Name of Organization	Title of text(s) or web page(s) included in analysis	URL
Stand for Education	Turning Around Low-Performing Schools	http://standleadershipcenter.org/what-we-stand-turnarounds
	Learning from the Evidence on School Choice	http://standleadershipcenter.org/sites/standleadershipcenter.org/files/media/WWSF-School%20Choice.pdf
Students First	Empowering Parents with Choice: The Parent Trigger	http://www.studentsfirst.org/policy/entry/empowering-parent-with-choice-the-parent-trigger
Walton Family Foundation	Walton Family Foundation Invests $8 Million in StudentsFirst	http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/mediacenter/studentsfirst-investment
	Systemic K-12 Education Reform	http://wff.cotcdn.rockfishhosting.com/documents/aee15915-9ab4-47a2-b9ce-0fcfd3dc359f.pdf
	Education Reform Gets a Hollywood Boost	http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/mediacenter/education-reform-gets-a-hollywood-boost
	Education Reform	http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/educationreform

These texts were uploaded into a qualitative analysis software package (NVIVO) in order to carry out a thorough qualitative analysis. The goal of this analysis was to identify both frame elements such as metaphors, exemplars, catch phrases, causal roots, solutions, and core values, as well as the overarching frame concept. To assist in this process, I developed a coding protocol, which served to guide my reading of the media included in the sample.

Protocols are recommended by Altheide and Schneider (2012) as a way to guide data collection and capture the meaning of text when conducting qualitative media analysis. I started with a basic protocol built around the frame elements identified by Gamson and Lasch (1981). I used this same framework in an earlier media study focused on the characterization of charter schools in the media (Feuerstein, 2014). The concept behind it was drawn from Jenkin, Signal, and Thompson (2011) who identified dominant frames employed in debates over the cause of obesity. Though the context of this study is different, the purpose of the protocol is similar and is meant to focus the researcher's attention on salient elements within the text. By focusing on the protocol's questions as I read the texts, I was able to code elements from each text in the sample and begin the process of categorization.

Table 3
Framing Protocol

Signature Elements	Protocol Categories	Questions
Metaphors	Concepts	Expression is drawn from what domain? What ideas are linked?
Exemplars	Different types of examples	What examples are used to explain the situation?
Catch Phrases	Common used phrases	Are they typical phrases that are repeated?
Depiction	General focus of article	How is the issue described?
	Nature of the problem/issue	Is there a particular problem or issue that is emphasized?
	Affected groups	Who is affected by the issue?
Roots	Main cause	What is the main cause of the issue or problem?
		Who or what is to blame/praise for the situation?
Consequences	Existing policy/situation	What are the views on the current policy or situation?
	Policy prescriptions	What solutions are proposed or implied?
	Agency	Who is suggested or implied as having sufficient agency to address the issue?
Appeals to Principle	Policy Values	What values or principles are evident in the problem presentation? (e.g. choice, efficiency, quality, equality)

Clarifying my coding was an ongoing process and involved the constant comparative technique, whereby I sought to compare newly coded material with previously coded excerpts and source material (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process helped to further refine my code categories and the way they fit within my emerging understanding of the dominant frame packages present in the media sample. Because this work is interpretive in nature, it is possible that others might read the same data differently. To address this possibility, I have tried to explain my interpretations and to also provide readers with examples from texts so that they might be able to make their own judgments regarding the quality of my depictions (Hall, 1997).

In the following section, I describe the dominant frames within the study sample and provide supporting excerpts from the data, which are representative of various frame elements.

Analysis

My analysis of the media texts developed by various organizations within the Parent Trigger policy network revealed two complimentary frames. The first, public schools are broken, depicted

traditional public schools as deeply flawed institutions existing within a dysfunctional system where self-serving adults (i.e. teachers and administrators) promote their own interests while ignoring the interests of children and their families. The second, empowering parents to choose, depicted efforts to establish new educational choices for parents and children through Parent Trigger laws as part of a broader struggle to strengthen the civil rights of poor and minority children. Each frame uses a different set of discursive mechanisms including metaphors, catch phrases, and depictions (framing devices), as well as causal stories, consequences, and political values (reasoning devices) to influence the way individuals and the broader public think about the appropriate mechanism for school reform.

Before exploring these frames in detail, Table 4 provides a summary of the prevalence of these frames in the texts included in the sample. For the purpose of the table, texts with at least one excerpt representing the *Public School Are Broken* frame were included in the tally for that frame. Likewise, texts with at least one excerpt representing the *Empowering Parents to Choose* frame were included in the tally for that frame. Nearly all of the texts contained evidence of both types of framing.

Table 4
Differences in Issue Framing by Text

Differential Framing Within the Media Sample		
Number of texts analyzed as part of the media sample (*n*=23)	Number of texts including *Public Schools Are Broken* framing (*n*=22)	Number of texts including *Empowering Parents to Choose* framing (*n*=23)

The table above shows that there was evidence of each frame in nearly all of the articles analyzed for this study. The fact that these frames overlap to this degree suggests that they work together and are mutually reinforcing. In the following sections, I summarize the main elements composing each frame and provide a number of illustrative examples. The frame packages are also summarized in tabular form at the end of each section.

Public Schools are Broken

Within the *Public Schools are Broken* frame, some of the most potent metaphors represent public schools as "drop-out factories" and suggest that there is little motivation for these institutions to change because public schools are part of a large dysfunctional bureaucracy or monopoly that is deaf to the pleas of everyday citizens. Both the Walton Family Foundation and Stand for Children, among others, support this perspective by citing data on the high drop-out rates in some high schools:

> Researchers have identified some 1,750 American high schools as "drop-out factories," where graduating classes are 40 percent smaller than when the students entered as freshmen. By whatever criteria they are defined, there are too many chronically low-performing schools in the United States, and they disproportionately serve black, Latino, and low-income students—perpetuating the achievement gap (Stand for Children, Mead, 2012, p. 1).

> More than 12% of the nation's high schools are dropout factories, with fewer than six of every 10 freshmen completing their senior year. The majority of students

> enrolled in these schools are minority and low-income, with little- or no-better
> educational options (Walton Family Foundation, Manno, 2012, p. 4)[3].

> [T]he fact remains that thousands of low-income students still do not receive the
> quality of education they need to be successful adults. Low-income students are
> more than two times as likely to drop out than their more affluent peers, with one
> million students not making it to graduation annually. The current system remains
> broken for far too many students and their families (Walton Family Foundation,
> Manno, 2013, p. 8-9).

These examples and others, often citing research by the US Department of Education, illustrate the
deep problems that exist in some public schools. However, these reports often decontextualize this
information and fail to provide a clear picture of the general success of public education in creating
graduates (approximately 75.5% of students graduated in from high school in 4 years in 2008-2009
[Ravitch, 2013, p. 343]) and the fact that the achievement gap between White students and their
Black counterparts has been slowly shrinking over the past twenty years (Ravitch, 2013, p. 332).
Along with this critique, supporters of Parent Trigger laws also suggest that public schools are
insulated from parental appeals for change because of their status as a monopoly. The following
excerpts from Democrats for Educational Reform (DFER), and the Heartland Institute, illustrate
this sentiment:

> We believe that reforming broken public school systems cannot be accomplished by
> tinkering at the margins, but rather through bold and revolutionary leadership. This
> requires opening up the traditional top-down monopoly of most school systems and
> empowering all parents to access great schools for their children (Democrats for
> Education Reform, Statement of Principles, n.d., p. 5).

> Instead [of responding to parent and student needs] , a cartel or monopoly is formed
> enabling the school system's adult employees to advance their own interests – job
> security, higher pay, fewer work hours, less accountability for results – at the expense
> of their customers, the students and their parents. (The Heartland Institute, Bast &
> Pullmann, 2012, p. 7)

These quotes emphasize lack of responsiveness to parental concern as a core issue in this frame.
        This lack of responsiveness is depicted as being caused by the disproportionate influence of
administrators and teachers who have chosen to protect their own interests rather those of children.
Similar statements follow a common pattern of blaming poor educational outcomes on teachers,
teachers unions, and administrators, all of whom are depicted as "defenders of the status-quo."
Several examples of these types of comments follow, and while they do not directly identify teachers
unions or administrators as the culprit, there is little ambiguity in the broader text from which these
excerpts are drawn:

> Today's would-be reformers have run up against a formidable, entrenched status quo
> in which established interests defend longstanding routines and enjoy the political

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[3] This article was later added to The Walton Family Foundation website but originally appeared in The Wall Street
Journal.

> clout to influence elections. Parent groups aim to balance those scales (American Enterprise Institute, Hess & Lautzenheiser, 2012, Public Schooling and Politics, p. 4).

> But because your Parent Union chapter gives you real power over the educational destiny of your own child, and because your power is independent from those who currently have it, some powerful defenders of the status quo view your power as a threat to their own. (Parent Revolution, Parent Power Handbook, n.d., Defenders of the Status Quo, p. 1).

> Every time defenders of the status quo employ lies, harassment and intimidation in order to stymie parents organizing, they prove better than we ever could why parents must have power over the education of their children. When we stand alone, we are vulnerable. When we stand together, we have power (Parent Revolution, Parent Power Handbook, n.d., Defenders of the Status Quo, p. 6).

> Teachers' unions and other elements of the status-quo coalition have blocked the vast majority of reforms the vast majority of the time. The resulting policy uniformity across states left little in the way of meaningful differences among states (American Legislative Exchange Council, Ladner, 2013, p. 14).

The ability of the schools to ignore parents, the frame suggests, can lead to a sense of powerlessness, as indicated in the following quotes:

> Whether they have a trigger law in their state or not, parents and educators everywhere can identify with the sense of powerlessness felt by the mother and the teacher in "Won't Back Down." (Walton Family Foundation, Manno, 2012, p. 4).

> Parents of students in failing schools often feel powerless to give their children a better education. Students First believes strongly in the need for policies that empower parents to improve the educational opportunities available to their children. (Students First, Empowering Parents with CHOICE: The Parent Trigger, n.d., p. 1).

Catch phrases associated with these metaphors and depictions include statements that refer to teachers unions and administrators as the "blob" (McGuin & Kelly, 2012, p. 3) or "defenders of the status quo" (Parent Revolution, Parent Power Handbook, n.d., Defenders of the Status Quo, p. 1). Current efforts at school improvement other than Parent Trigger are described as, "rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic" (The Heartland Institute, Bast et. al., 2010, p. 7). In general, many of the groups in this policy network talk about Parent Trigger as "parent power" or "parent empowerment."

This framing suggests that the root cause of problems experienced by students in failing schools is lack of parental access to decision-making, teacher recalcitrance, and over-regulation. Little is said about role of resources, poverty, or other structural impediments in creating educational challenges for teachers and students. Discussion of such issues is often labeled as excuse making. Instead, parental voice, in the form of petition drives expressing an interest in turnaround, restart, closure, or transformation is put forward as the key element necessary to improve student performance.

Overall, the *Public Schools Are Broken* frame (summarized in Table 5) positions schools as defective institutions and principals and teachers as parties who are uninterested in making change. Parent Trigger laws are presented as the ultimate means of shifting the status quo by giving parents the means and authority to influence school policy. This remedy rests on the value of choice as a means of increasing governmental responsiveness, improving educational quality, and increasing system efficiency. What is omitted from this discussion is the notion that voting in and of itself is often considered a weak form of democracy (Barber, 2003), and that a one-time vote by current parents may actually serve to decrease democratic control of one of our most important public institutions. This point will be considered further in the conclusion of this paper. Prior to that consideration, however, the following section characterizes the *Empowering Parents to Choose* frame, which further emphasizes the value of choice and the ways in which greater parental control over public education could be achieved.

Table 5
Public Schools are Broken Frame Package

Package Title	Metaphors	Exemplars (references to real events of the past and present)	Catch-phrases	Depictions	Roots	Consequences	Appeals to Principle
Public schools are broken	Public schools are like large monopolies'	DC public schools consistently rank as the most dangerous in the United States, with the highest percentage of students reporting threats or injuries with a weapon on school grounds.(Heartland, Lehrer, 2011, p. 13)	Educators in traditional schools are defenders of the status quo	Teachers, administrators and board members have a "manifest" conflict of interest	Teacher are over-regulated and not treated like professionals	Too many kids are trapped in bad schools	Quality
	Teacher unions and educational administers are a "blob"	Most people who have experience attempting to create improvement by such activities know they often are fruitless. (Heartland, Bast et al., 2010, p. 5)	Teacher unions do what is best for teachers not kids	Schools don't take parents seriously	Too many regulations have led to public school failure	Drop out factories are allowed to persist	Choice
	Public schools are like factories	Prior to Hurricane Katrina, about 60 percent of the city's public schools failed to meet Louisiana's minimum academic standards. Following the storm's destruction, state and local leaders rebuilt the K-12 system on the principles of empowering parents through choice and competition. (Walton, The Walton Family Foundation, n.d. p. 8)	Most reform is rearranging deck chairs on the titanic	Millions of children are trapped in persistently failing schools	Public schools have been unresponsive to their clients	Deep dissatisfaction with the status quo	Efficiency
		When parents in the Los Angeles Unified School District organized behind the Parent Trigger idea last year, the powerful United Teachers of Los Angeles union began circulating rumors in Hispanic neighborhoods that parents would be forced to pay tuition at a charter school and could even be deported if they signed a petition. (Heartland, Bast et al., 2010, p. 3)		Educational politics is dominated by the educational establishment and teachers unions	Lack of parental involvement	Alienation and frustration	Responsiveness of govt.

Empowering Parents to Choose

This frame further emphasizes the importance of choice and uses metaphors that compare the struggle of parents to control public schools with a war or battle. Terms such as "regime change" are commonly used to talk about what will happen if Parent Trigger petitions are successful. Often the metaphors draw parallels between efforts to enact Parent Trigger laws and the civil rights movement. Some examples using these types of metaphors include:

> The Parent Trigger has the potential to turbo-charge the transformation of education in every state by bringing grassroots "regime change" to "public education " (The Heartland Institute, Bast et. al., 2010, p. 1)

> Reform-minded parent groups are likely at their best when they face off against organized interests such as teachers unions or district management. It is the classic David versus Goliath story, one that puts Democratic politicians in the position of siding with "special interests" or their constituents (American Enterprise Institute, McGuinn & Kelly, 2012, p. 43).

> In California, the parents seeking to pull the trigger for the first time needed the help – financial as well as organizationally – of philanthropists and charter school entrepreneurs to battle well-funded teachers unions and school boards (The Heartland Institute, Bast & Pullmann, 2012, p. 16).

> You've probably heard the Compton Parent Trigger story by now: over 200 parents grew tired of seeing their kids drop out and fail to learn to read at one of the chronically, lowest performing schools in California. So they banded together to use the historic new Parent Trigger Law (which I authored), only to face an all-out assault by the Compton Unified School District against their efforts to create a better future for their children. What these parents are doing invokes the spirit of Mendez, a 1946 federal court case that challenged racial segregation in Orange County schools (Democrats for Education Reform, Romero, n.d., p. 1).

These excerpts emphasize the struggle of parents to improve schools against substantial and entrenched opponents. In the "David and Goliath story," traditional public schools are the well-trained and armed Goliath and inexperienced parents are presented as David. What this metaphor fails to recognize is the substantial resources and expertise associated with organizations such as The Walton Family Foundation, The Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, and Democrats for Education Reform that support Parent Trigger legislation.

Some of the metaphors used draw parallels with the civil right movement. In the example above, parents are said to be invoking the spirit of *Mendez,* a case where parents challenged racial segregation. In that case, a group of concerned parents banded together to challenge the educational establishment, which supported segregated schools. Here parents are also depicted as battling entrenched interests for the rights of their children.

Included with these metaphors are a number of catch phrases frequently used to suggest the epic nature of the battle underway and the need to act quickly to provide a democratic remedy for the injustices now taking place. For example, categories such as "bold change", "immediate change", and "democratic change" characterize the rhetoric being used to build a compelling case for the Parent Trigger. Examples in each of these categories follow:

Bold change.

We believe that reforming broken public school systems cannot be accomplished by tinkering at the margins, but rather through bold and revolutionary leadership. (Democrats for Education Reform, Statement of Principles, n.d., p. 5).

Better to keep the program bold and big and resist the temptation to compromise until and unless doing so is absolutely necessary (Heartland Institute, Bast & Pullmann, 2012, p. 31).

Last year proved to be a watershed year, as lawmakers across the nation took bold moves to empower parents. These policies ranged from increasing publicly-funded school options to giving parents the right to demand an immediate overhaul of a chronically failing school to increasing parent access to information about school and teacher quality (Walton Family Foundation, Manno, n.d., p. 2).

Immediate change.

As we all know, parents can't wait for pilot programs or half measures – our children get older every single year, and we only get one chance to give them the education they need for the future they deserve (Parent Revolution, Parent Power Handbook, n.d., Welcome to Parent Revolution, p. 3).

There is a need for greater urgency in turning around low-performing schools. Policymakers must not wait too long to take action, nor should they wait too long for turnaround efforts to produce results. Turning around low-performing schools requires bold action, not just incremental change (Stand for Children, Mead, 2012, p. 12).

Democratic change.

The Parent Trigger is a powerful idea because it is a bottom-up tool for school reform, not a top- down commandment that is likely to be twisted, diluted, and delayed on its way to implementation. It empowers parents by making it easier for them to express their opinions – as simple as signing a petition – and to have their opinions matter (Heartland Institute, Bast & Pullmann, 2012, p. 11).

[Parent Trigger] is democratic rather than autocratic, opt-in rather than one-size-fits-all, and popular with parents and politicians of both major parties (Heartland Institute, Bast & Pullmann, 2012, p. 12).

Requiring parental signatures to represent at least a majority of students ensures a democratic process and prevents a minority interest from having too much power (Students First, Empowering Parents with Choice, n.d., p. 3).

Parent Trigger gives parents historic power to transform failing schools through community organizing and make sure decisions about schools are being made solely

based on the best interests of their children (Parent Revolution, Passing the Parent Trigger, Why is it so important? n.d.-b, p. 1).

The similarities and consistency in these comments from group to group reinforces the idea that the organizations composing the policy network now driving Parent Trigger are also members in a discursive community where ideas are shared and repeated. This pattern also reflects the ways in which neoliberal views on education with respect to accountability and market-based competition have permeated educational politics. A critical view of this discourse (Apple, 2006; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Pedroni, 2007; Watkins, 2011; Ylimaki, 2010) suggests that these kinds of representations have the effect of challenging earlier social democratic educational values while supporting and naturalizing a focus on choice and competition. The core of this frame focuses on strategies for creating change. If parents are "empowered" through Parent Trigger, the frame argues, schools will be forced to listen to what parents have to say. These signature elements are summarized in Appendix D.

The key rhetorical strategy employed by this frame associates neoliberal values of choice and competition with civil rights and democracy. Pedroni (2007) notes that similar strategies influenced African American parents to become voucher proponents in the Milwaukee voucher movement. However, he does not believe that these parents are unwitting accomplices to a corporate agenda. Rather, he interprets African American participation in the movement as an effort on the part of parents to use their status as educational consumers to win equity and respect for their children in a context where their voice as citizens was ignored. In this context, Parent Trigger laws are framed as the best way to provide parents with more influence over the nature and quality of their childrens' education. Understanding the deep disaffection of many groups with traditional public schools is important because it helps to explain the attraction of neoliberal choice arguments. This type of insight is essential for those interested in defending public education. As Lipman (2011) citing Pedroni (2007) suggests, "Resisting predatory neoliberal policies requires acknowledging and grappling with the exclusions and inequities of public institutions" (The "Good Sense" in Neoliberal Education Policy, p. 4). In this regard, developing the alliances necessary to resist Parent Trigger laws requires insight into the rhetoric used by Parent Trigger advocates, as well as recognition that the public must address the institutional biases and practices that work against the success of poor and minority students and allow our system of public education to serve as an instrument of social reproduction (Anyon, 1997; Lareau, 2011; Lipman, 2011).

Table 6
Empowering Parents to Choose Frame Package

Package Title	Metaphors	Exemplars (references to real events of the past and present)	Catch-phrases	Depictions	Roots	Consequences	Appeals to Principle
Empowering parents to choose	Parent Trigger is like the civil rights movement	"Over 200 parents grew tired of seeing their kids drop out and fail to learn to read at one of the chronically, lowest performing schools in California. So they banded together to use the historic new Parent Trigger Law (which I authored), only to face an all-out assault by the Compton Unified School District against their efforts to create a better future for their children." (Democrats for Education Reform, Romero, n.d., p. 1)	Parent Trigger is democratic not autocratic Regime change	It is a bottom up movement Only way to transform education is to give parents more power	Schools are unresponsive to the needs of kids an desires of parents b/c they are a monopoly	Schools will listen to parents Parents will reshape the landscape of public education	Choice
	The struggle for Parent Trigger is like a war or battle	In California, the parents seeking to pull the trigger for the first time needed the help – financial as well as organizationally – of philanthropists and charter school entrepreneurs to battle well-funded teachers unions and school boards (The Heartland Institute, Bast & Pullmann, 2012, p. 16).	We can't wait…	Will convince school officials to take parents seriously	Adults benefiting from the status quo have successfully blocked efforts at reform	Bad schools will close	Efficiency
	Schools are unresponsive bureaucracies	Lydia Grant, a parent in the Los Angeles suburb of Sunland-Tujunga, is leading a Parent Trigger petition drive at Mt. Gleason Middle School. "There is an unsafe atmosphere at this school that is spilling over into the community," Grant explained to the Los Angeles Daily News. "People are tired of it and we want to see change." (Heartland ,Bast et al., 2010, p. 3)	A child's education should not be dictated by zip code	Parental involvement is routinely blocked		Charters will proliferate	Minority ought not have more power than the majority
			Parent Trigger is big and bold	When parents get to choose all schools improve Parents can battle entrenched interests		Competition will spur innovation Money will follow the child	Right to petition

Conclusion

The two frames described above present a picture of public education as "broken" and in need of radical reform. The proposed Parent Trigger option, which seeks to circumvent elected school boards, focuses on options such as closing schools, reconstituting schools, or converting traditional public schools to charter schools, all of which directly challenge the social democratic values that have favored the public provision of education since the advent of the common school movement. Simultaneously, such framing elevates and naturalizes neoliberal approaches to the provision of educational services that emphasize choice and competition as the best ways to improve equality of opportunity and educational quality. Focusing on petition as the mechanism of transformation successfully promotes neoliberal perspectives by tapping into popular notions about the value of direct democracy.

On the surface, Parent Trigger provisions can be interpreted as a radically democratic means of initiating institutional change; this position is strongly emphasized by those entities promoting Parent Trigger laws. Those who favor mechanisms of direct democracy often suggest that the best cure for problems with representative forms of government (like school boards) is more democracy. These supporters view petitions as the best way to enact democratic values because they provide greater insight into the interests of various stakeholders. The following list of potential benefits associated with the use of mechanisms such as petitions and referenda to make policy is based on the work of Cronin (1999):

> Government will be increasingly responsive and accountable. (e.g. School officials will no longer be able to ignore the voice of the people.)

> Ideas initiated by the local populace will not be hindered by representatives who answer to special interests rather than the general public.

> New opportunities for open debate on important educational issues will be created.

> Political participation will increase because petition provides new ways for citizens to express political interests.

> Representatives will be forced to address difficult issues that they might prefer to ignore because they are controversial or might alienate their voting base.

While such benefits would seem to support the use of the petition, giving parents the special ability to alter educational policy has other consequences as well; it draws political power away from other local constituencies such as individuals without children, senior citizens, property owners, and business owners; groups whose stake in the public schools is decidedly different from that of parents.

Extending this critique, Cronin (1999) suggests that petitions and referenda have a variety of drawbacks that tend to limit broad-based democratic participation. In the case of Parent Trigger laws, these drawbacks include the possibility that:

> Parent Trigger laws could create a tyranny of the majority.

> Many people are not well enough informed about the possible drawbacks of school choice to make an informed choice through a petition or referendum.

> Well-financed interest groups might use their resources to organize local parents and unfairly take advantage of petition procedures.

> The accountability of elected officials will be weakened because they no longer control policy.

> Petition signers will act mostly on their own short-term self-interest and will not have to live with the long-term consequences of their decision.

> Individuals are vulnerable to deceptive media campaigns that promise more than they can deliver.

> The rights of those who cannot afford to mount robust media campaigns will be diminished.

In the long run, such outcomes may serve to weaken democracy by limiting the constituencies able to participate in the decision-making process or by providing an avenue for small, well organized, groups to wield outsized influence. Barber (2003) has similar concerns about the kind of liberal democracy practiced in the United States as a whole. He believes that current practices are designed, "more to promote individual liberty than to secure public justice, to advance interests rather than to discover goods, and to keep men safely apart rather than to bring them fruitfully together" (Barber, 2003, p. 4). As such, he concludes that current democratic practices are "capable of fiercely resisting every assault on the individual – his privacy, his property, his interests – but is less effective in resisting assaults on community or justice or citizenship or participation" (Barber, 2003, p. 4). In this regard, parental petitions can be considered a "thin" form of democracy because they tend to focus on the individual interests of a segment of the community rather than the interests of the community as a whole.

This type of "thin" democracy is substantially different from the "thick" democracy advocated by Dewey (2009/1916) in *Democracy and Education* where differences of opinion were to be settled through ongoing public deliberation. According to Mansbridge and her colleagues (2010), there is general consensus among theorists regarding the requirements of deliberative democracy. The primary requirement is that the deliberation is "open to all those affected by the decision" (Mansbridge et al., 2010, p. 65). In addition, it is important that "[p]articipants … have equal opportunity to influence the process, have equal resources, and be protected by basic rights" (p. 65). Such conditions are meant to support honest, truthful communication where participants "listen to one another and give reasons to one another that they think the others can comprehend and accept" (p. 65). Perhaps most importantly, "[p]articipants should not try to change others' behavior through the threat of sanction or the use of force" (p. 65). In other words, individuals and groups should allow differing perspectives to proliferate even if they are in conflict.

These distinctions between "thicker" deliberative forms of democracy and "thinner" more individually focused forms are particularly important in the debate over Parent Trigger laws. Such laws seek to alter traditional public school governance structures by circumventing the authority of traditionally elected school board in favor of government by petition. Such a shift threatens the democratic value of elected school boards which are meant to serve as a forum for community members to voice concerns and work out differences regarding the best direction for local school

policies and practices. While these institutions do not always live up their democratic promise, and some community members may rightly view school boards as ineffective in representing their interests, they remain one of the last vestiges of grass roots democracy in the United States (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Lipman, 2011). The "thick" version of democracy described above is inconsistent with the efforts of Parent Trigger activists to sever the linkages between communities and their schools by circumventing school boards and redefining the appropriate public for making educational decisions.

When the public is defined too narrowly it can disenfranchise important constituencies and impede the development of shared aims. For example, some evidence suggests that this is what occurred in Compton and in the Adelanto School District (both in California) in order for the Parent Trigger legislation to pass (Ravitch, 2013). According to Ravitch (2013), Parent Revolution, used their considerable resources to organize parents in these districts taking advantage of the fact that the community was largely uninformed about educational issues. Such organizing is sometimes described as "astroturfing" where citizen advocacy for an issue is made to appear organic, but is actually supported by a hidden network of interest groups and consultants that have used significant incentives and manipulation to mobilize participation (Cho, Martens, Kim, & Rodrigue, 2011). Alternatively, in a more recent example, the Aneheim City School district, rejected a Parent Trigger petition brought by the parents of children attending Palm Lane Elementary School in February of 2015 because it doubted the veracity of some of the signatures (Tully, 2015). Earlier, in January of 2015, some parent activists claimed that they had been bullied by the teachers' union in their efforts to gather signatures (The Wall Street Journal, 2015). In general, such efforts to influence and intimidate constituents run counter to the tenets of deliberative democracy put forward by Mansbridge and her colleagues (2010) because they create division and diminish the capacity of community members to talk across differences and develop shared aims. Thus, while grass-roots organizing can be beneficial when it addresses authentic community concerns brought to light through engaged work in the community, it can also be damaging if the tactics used to motivate political action lack a legitimate foundation.

In the case of Parent Trigger laws, it seems clear that they are supported by a well-funded policy network that strongly favors charter schools and school choice models. The ability of groups such as Parent Revolution, The Heartland Institute, and others to subtly shift their message and frame the solution to problems with public schools as matters of individual choice and civil rights is central to their ability to promote market-based school reform concepts. Until communities are able to develop greater critical awareness of these issues and the discursive strategies used to influence their views and perceptions, their ability to make fully informed policy choices will be incomplete. This study contributes to the development of a more critical perspective concerning the media produced by various groups within the growing neoliberal policy network. This more critical point of view can support individuals and groups in their efforts to assess the limits and possibilities embedded in the school reform policies now being promoted (Shannon, 2011). Critical analysis of media communications is necessary if individuals and groups are to make informed choices about accepting or resisting the current framing of the Parent Trigger issue.

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