

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN CRISIS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF NEWS FRAMING SINCE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN CRISIS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF NEWS FRAMING SINCE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is the culmination of three years of work leading up to my master's degree. It included long nights, juggling schedules and pushing myself to keep researching, writing and analyzing even when my brain was already exhausted from a long day at work. My fortitude in this endeavor would not have been possible without the support of the following people.

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ABSTRACT

Public confidence in the U.S. education system has steadily eroded as a prevailing narrative has formed in the news media claiming that public schools are failing and in crisis. Yet, student academic performance has increased in the past decades despite schools facing the challenges of more economic and cultural diversity and increased accountability. In response, this study seeks to examine how the news media frame public education, particularly since the adoption of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Does the news coverage of public education characterize schools as in crisis? Do articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate the failing schools narrative in the news coverage of public education? A quantitative content analysis of 332 newspaper articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2012 coded the types of frames used, words used to illustrate a failing public schools theme, sources referenced, attribution of blame to specific individuals or groups, and overall tone or impression given of public schools. The results provided evidence that articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate a failing schools narrative. Specifically, the study showed that the same types of frames identified in research on other topics are also used in the news coverage of public education; public education is framed more episodically than thematically; a failing public schools theme was identified; and the news coverage, while mostly balanced, had a higher frequency of negative articles than positive.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The status of public education reached an all-time low in 2012 when only 33 percent of Americans expressed confidence in public schools (Jones, 2012). Americans' confidence in the education system was also at least 10 percentage points lower than historical averages for public schools (Jones, 2012). Along with this cooling public sentiment, a prevailing narrative has formed in the news media claiming the public education system is in "crisis," schools are "failing" and teachers are "ineffective" (Farhi, 2012, p. 1). Yet, even as public schools become more ethnically and culturally diverse, important measures of student academic success, including high school and college graduation rates and performance on standardized tests, demonstrate that educational attainment has never been higher in the United States (Farhi, 2012).

In fact, while confidence in public schools has steadily eroded, student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and high school dropout rates have improved. NAEP math scores have gone up 15 points for eighth-graders and 24 points for fourth-graders since 1973 (Smith III, Turner & Lattanzio, 2012). The high school dropout rate, which was once in the double-digits and as high as 15 percent in 1970, was 7.4 percent in 2010, according to the National Center for Education Statistics – a remarkable improvement over the prior decades (Smith III, Turner & Lattanzio, 2012). At the same time, the composition of American public school classrooms has become more ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged, presenting new challenges for teachers to overcome. For example, the percentage of non-

Hispanic White children living in the U.S. has decreased from 61 percent to 53 percent in the past decade while the percentage of Hispanic/Latino children has increased from 17 percent to 24 percent (National KIDS COUNT Program, 2012). Additionally, in the past 10 years the percentage of children living in poverty has increased from 17 percent to 23 percent (National KIDS COUNT Program, 2012).

Public schools are described as failing and confidence in them is low while data indicates that student performance is improving. This perception-versus-reality conflict could be illustrated in the way the news shapes the discussion of America's schools and ultimately the public's perceptions of the educational system. In response, this study seeks to examine how the news media frame public education, particularly since the adoption of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Does the news coverage of public education characterize schools as in *crisis*? Do articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate the *failing schools* narrative in the news coverage of public education?

The assertion in the news media that public schools are in decline is not new for educators, who have long expressed the belief that negative media coverage is to blame for decreasing confidence in public schools. To them, news coverage of public schools amounts to reporters writing "what sells" and focusing on conflict and failure (Bradley, 1997). In fact, the argument that reporters either actively or passively use frames to shape the articles they write has been observed throughout multiple disciplines. Extensive research has been conducted on news framing in a variety of situations. However, formal studies of framing in education news are limited. Therefore, there is room in the literature to study the framing of news stories about education, particularly since the advent of No Child Left Behind. Preliminary data collection by Farhi (2012) demonstrates a growth in

the mentions of the word “failing” in news articles covering education since No Child Left Behind. The failing public schools narrative has also been identified through several qualitative studies. However, quantitative research is needed to provide more information about the framing of education news coverage.

The purpose of this research is to examine the newspaper coverage of No Child Left Behind to determine whether certain frames are used and if those frames characterize public education as in crisis. It is well established by communication scholars that frames are present in the news (Entman, 1993; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Scheufele, 1999; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; de Vreese, 2005; McQuail, 2010). Frames can be observed and identified “by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). According to Cappella and Jamieson (1997), frames must have identifiable conceptual and linguistic features, be commonly observed in journalistic practice, be distinguishable from other frames, and be recognizable by others. De Vreese (2005) added that framing is a process, and it is necessary for researchers to become aware of different types of frames in order to understand when and how they are at work.

Communication scholars have also established that certain types of frames are regularly found in news coverage of a variety of topics. These frames, which some scholars have called generic frames, can be used to generalize the results of framing studies to the news coverage of other topics (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; de Vreese, 2005; Matthes, 2009; Borah, 2011). Because generic frames have been identified in prior research studies and can be generalized, they should

be used instead of issue-specific frames, which are tailored to a particular topic. Scholars have identified the following generic news frames, which will be defined more specifically in the sections to follow: episodic, thematic, conflict, attribution of responsibility, context and sources.

Some preliminary evidence suggests that stories about education may also contain these generic frames (Farhi, 2012; Briggs, 2012), but more research is needed to establish that the same generic frames that have been found in research studies on other topics, such as healthcare, crime and politics, can be found in the news coverage of education. For example, generic frames have been helpful in describing how issues are framed in situations that are defined as crises (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011), and these same frames should be examined in the news coverage of No Child Left Behind to see if they are contributing to a narrative of a supposed education crisis.

No Child Left Behind is the common name for the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act. The law set strict standards for public school accountability and performance. It has been credited with helping school districts improve their students' achievement, but it has also received a variety of critiques. The benchmark legislation requires schools to measure themselves against high standards of academic performance set by their states and conduct standardized testing of students annually in exchange for federal funding. Under the current law, all students are required to test on grade level in reading and math by 2014.

The language "failing schools" has been institutionalized, in part, by No Child Left Behind (Farhi, 2012). Schools that do not achieve at a certain level on their annual performance measures, called Adequate Yearly Progress, are considered to be "failing"

under the law. Each year, the academic performance bar is raised with the expectation that schools will have all of their students experience academic improvement each year. As the bar has raised each year since No Child Left Behind was enacted, more and more schools have received the failing label. In 2011, 48 percent of public schools did not make Adequate Yearly Progress and were considered “failing” under the law (Diallo, 2011).

No Child Left Behind is recognized widely for the improvements it made to the accountability of schools through the use of annual measurements. Although inconsistencies can exist between states, all states are now required to measure their students’ progress, and schools are held accountable when their students do not grow. This means more data on student performance is available to parents, government officials and the public now than there has ever been before. Schools previously measured their academic progress by averaging all student scores (Farhi, 2012), but under No Child Left Behind, scores are reported by subgroups, including race/ethnicity, federal Free and Reduced Lunch status, limited English proficiency and disability. One benefit of No Child Left Behind is that the achievement gaps for these groups are now apparent, and schools are required to improve the academic performance of all students. It is possible that this new data may simply make apparent what has always been true of the achievement gaps for race, poverty and other subgroups instead of notating a new crisis of failing schools (Farhi, 2012). No Child Left Behind has improved accountability for all children, no matter their circumstances.

For all the benefits this detailed accountability brings, No Child Left Behind receives harsh criticism from public school administrators, because Adequate Yearly

Progress is an all-or-nothing measure. For schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress, they must make expected growth for all of their subgroups. If one of their subgroups does not make expected growth for a school year, the whole school is considered failing. Thus, it is possible for a school to raise its test scores from one year to the next but fail under No Child Left Behind. The law is also criticized regularly due to the inconsistencies of standards between states. Since states set their own performance bars for each year, some states' standards are much easier or harder to meet than others. A "failing" school in one state may not be failing in another.

In 2011, the federal government introduced a flexibility waiver program to allow states a chance to apply for relief from parts of No Child Left Behind. The White House announced that the waiver would help districts move forward with school reforms that may have been stifled under the law, which was due for reauthorization by Congress for four years (The White House, 2011).

This study examines the frames that are used in the news coverage of No Child Left Behind since it was enacted in 2001. If this research finds that the same generic frames identified in previous studies on other topics are used in stories about No Child Left Behind, the findings would point toward future research into the effects the framing may have on audiences and their perceptions of the quality or status of public education. This is important research, because public education is an essential institution that impacts most Americans in some way, whether they currently attend or previously attended a public school or pay taxes that go toward funding schools. Since public education is governed by local, state and federal governments, it is important for the public to have access to factual, unbiased information about how schools are performing.

An important step toward making any improvements that may be needed in public education would be the provision of certain essential information in news stories so educators, lawmakers and citizens are informed sufficiently. This includes providing background information, data and definitions that enrich the public dialogue about education.

The subsequent sections of this paper provide an explanation of the framing theoretical approach with an overview of prior research related to news coverage of public education and the limited existing research specifically covering the news framing of education. Next, the methods to be used in this research study will be described. The paper concludes with a presentation of the data, an explanation of the results, the limitations of the study and areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

While there has been a considerable amount of research on framing, there is little research about the framing of public education. However, framing research would be an important addition to the limited literature on news coverage of public schools. The studies that do review news coverage of education focus more on the number of reporters assigned to cover education or how many articles are produced and not on the content of the articles (Hynds, 1981; 1989). News coverage of education has largely been ignored in scholarly research, so a study is needed to provide data in this area.

Framing is an appropriate theoretical approach to use in a study of public education news coverage, because framing research has been shown to provide evidence for how information is communicated and what effect it has on people (McQuail, 2010). Evidence exists of potential framing in education news that lacks data and historical context, includes sensational language, places the blame narrowly on educators and the *failing* schools, and provides a pessimistic impression of the state of schools (Farhi, 2012). However, these findings should be further substantiated through quantitative methods. Evidence of particular frames would provide insight into the way newspapers shape their coverage of education. It is important to bring these frames to light, since frames have been shown to influence the perceived reality among the public.

Framing is one of the most popular ways to study newspaper coverage of topics, and it continues to be an important theoretical approach within mass communication

research (Matthes, 2009). Framing is also included heavily in the literature on content analysis, which is the method used in this research study (McQuail, 2010).

Framing as a Theoretical Approach

There is a full body of literature focused on how news coverage is presented, or framed. Goffman (1974) is credited with the original concept that frames are used to organize fragments of information or experiences into something contextual and understandable. In other words, frames give meaning to a collection of information units that otherwise would be meaningless (Goffman, 1974) – at least that every audience member would have to organize for him or herself before “meaning” was constructed. Framing theory is situated within the social constructionism perspective, which emphasizes that reality is created and interpreted by humans. Social construction, in the journalistic sense, is the process whereby events, people, values or ideas are initially defined and given value or priority by the media, and then as a result, influence what people believe by promoting a selective view of reality (McQuail, 2010). Social constructionism combines the elements of both strong and limited media effects. Mass media have a strong impact on constructing social reality, but individuals have a share in constructing meaning, so media effects are limited by the interpretation of the recipient (Scheufele, 1999). Given this perspective, framing research is focused on studying both the framing processes used by the media (sometimes referred to as the sociological research strand) and the effects of framing on the public (psychological strand) (Borah, 2011).

While Goffman (1974) introduced the idea of frames, Entman (1993) is regularly cited as providing the groundwork for framing research (Matthes, 2009). He envisioned

the development of one synthesized theory of framing that would bring together the insights and theories of framing from various disciplines into one research paradigm – or one general theory of common understanding – that would inform future studies. Although framing research could be found throughout the social sciences and humanities, there was not a unified explication of how frames were included in texts, how they manifested themselves or how the frames influenced a reader’s thinking. Previously, framing was defined rather casually with much of the interpretation left up to the reader. Due to this casual nature, the term *frame* has been used throughout the literature in place of terms such as “frame of reference,” “context,” “theme,” and “news angle” (McQuail, 2010, p. 380).

In Entman’s (1993) explication of framing, he defined it as selecting “some aspects of perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). This has been identified as the most influential definition in the framing literature (Matthes, 2009).

There are many ways for framing to be accomplished within the media, including the use of certain words or phrases, contextual references, visuals, similes and metaphors or common narrative structures (McQuail, 2010). Carragee and Roefs (2004) emphasized that frames are much more than simply the story topics covered in the news; they usually include some form of valuation.

News frames have four roles: They define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). This can be accomplished in one or more sentences, or a particular frame may not accomplish all four functions at once.

According to Entman (1993), not all sentences in a text will perform a framing function. Additionally, frames can be identified in at least four locations: (1) in communicators, who make either conscious or unconscious decisions about what to say based on the schemata that organize their beliefs; (2) in texts, which include frames created by the use (or absence) of certain words, phrases, stereotyped images, sources or clusters of thematically reinforcing facts or judgments; (3) in the receiver's cognition (may or may not reflect the frames the communicator intended); and (4) in the culture (commonly accepted or understood within the discourse and thinking of groups of people). In all four areas, framing serves a similar purpose: selection of what to highlight and the use of the highlighted elements to construct an argument about problems, what caused them, an evaluation and/or a solution (Entman, 1993).

Frames work by highlighting certain bits of information about a subject through communication. The highlighting of certain items gives them what Entman calls *salience*, or makes them more meaningful, noticeable and memorable. Information becomes salient through its placement in a text, through repetition or through associations with symbols that are familiar in a particular culture. Salience also depends on whether the information aligns with the receiver's existing culture or belief system. This means that the simple presence of frames in a text is not enough to guarantee their influence on audience thinking, because salience is "the product of the interaction of texts and receivers" (p. 53).

Frames highlight some features of reality and omit others. They determine whether people will notice or remember a problem and how they will understand, evaluate and act upon it. While frames provide salience and point an audience toward

certain aspects of reality, they also direct attention away from others. What is omitted through framing may be as critical to audience interpretation as what is included (Entman, 1993).

In addition to media frames, the concept of framing includes the effects that framing can have on the audience. News frames have the capacity of influencing audience response to communication heavily, especially with social or political issues, because many people rely on the news to get information on these areas (Entman, 1993). However, framing effects are not universal. One could expect to find them across large parts of an audience, but it cannot be assumed they will affect everyone equally. If an audience is not familiar with a construct and the construct is not explained in a news story, then the frame that applies to the construct will not have an effect on the audience. Therefore, framing effects can vary based on the cognition of the audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This means that the simple presence of frames in a text is not enough to guarantee their influence on audience thinking, because the effects depend on the interaction of the frames presented in the text and the audience's reasoning (Entman, 1993).

The power of frames and their effect on audiences can be great, because once certain terms or phrases are used to describe something, communicators must continue to use them or run the risk of confusing the audience (Entman, 1993). Frames also possess power in that they can impact the response of an audience to an issue if frames provide them with a certain interpretation and do not present alternative information (Entman, 1993). Some scholars have asserted that framing research would benefit from future

study in the area of framing effects to discover more about how frames operate in public opinion formation (de Vreese, 2005).

A Unified Theory or Diverse Research Paradigm?

As the body of literature and research on framing theory grows, the ways in which framing is studied have also multiplied and become more diverse. Matthes' (2009) content analysis of framing studies from 1990 to 2005 found that framing studies follow different types of definitions, units of analysis, frames (issue-specific or generic) and methods. Some scholars (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999) support the development of a single, shared paradigm or program of study with common definitions and operations in order to unite the studies from multiple disciplines and solidify framing theory as a major contribution to the field of communication research. Other scholars believe paradigmatic diversity is a benefit to the framing theoretical approach (D'Angelo, 2002). Counter to Entman (1993) and others, D'Angelo (2002) argued that a united or mended theory of framing was not needed. Instead, he explained framing research as a "research program" (p. 871), where researchers could study the phenomena using many different theories. From his perspective many, even competing, theories may be needed to understand framing fully (D'Angelo, 2002).

Several scholars have proposed that framing should be connected with agenda setting and priming in order to more fully explain some of the similarities that can be found between the disciplines. However, for others, an exploration of the possible connections has left more questions than answers (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Some

scholars have defined them as parts of a whole, while other researchers have explicated them separately.

McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997) suggested that framing is an extension of agenda setting and used the term *second-level agenda setting* to describe its impact on news coverage. In their process, agenda setting, or the determination of issue salience occurs first, and then second-level agenda setting (or framing) occurs second. Second-level agenda setting is when the salience of attributes within the issue occurs (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997).

On the other hand, Scheufele (1999) and others have conceptualized framing as a separate theory that placed emphasis on salience, as defined by Entman (1993), or the particular aspects of reality within a story, rather than an emphasis on which overall topics to care about as is studied through agenda setting. In other words, agenda setting and priming focus on *whether* we think about an issue and framing focuses on *how* we think about it (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Weaver (2007) determined that communication research on framing, agenda setting and priming are related but not identical. According to his interpretation, they all involve cognitive processes and effects that are similar to each other, but should not be identified as one in the same. Framing has become a much more common area of research than either agenda setting or priming in the past decade. Framing studies have grown dramatically while priming has seen only modest growth and agenda-setting studies have leveled off. This is perhaps due to a certain level of ambiguity in framing research while priming and agenda setting are more clearly defined (Weaver, 2007).

Entman (2007), who earlier had called for the clarification of framing under one paradigm, did not conceptualize framing, priming and agenda-setting as one in the same, but he did propose integrating knowledge derived from the three areas under the concept of *bias* in order to better understand how together they contribute to political power. Entman argued that bias could become a robust, theory-driven research concept. He proposed using content bias (when one side is favored over another) and decision-making bias (the influence of journalists' mindset and motivations) to advance the understanding of the media's role in distributing power and to provide practical guidance to journalists who want to produce news that is "fair and balanced" (p. 164). He relates framing, priming and agenda setting in the following manner: Agenda setting serves as the first function of bias by defining the issues that are worthy of public attention. Then strategic framing promotes the causes, responses and moral judgments. Finally, priming is the intended effect of the framing activities by getting people to think or behave in a certain way.

Evidence of content bias in the media would be patterns in the framing of stories that would promote one side over another and influence the audience to support certain interests. These content biases can exist even if journalists do not have any particular ideological goals and intend to promote balance. Since political power is defined as getting people to do what one wants, the way to exert political influence in a democratic society is to tell people what to think about (Entman, 2007). If certain patterns of slant persist over time, across topics and throughout various media outlets, the news media may be distributing political power to particular groups or viewpoints. According to Entman, it is reasonable to assume that when the media is clearly slanted, the groups,

individuals or ideas that are favored in the news coverage become more powerful and free to do what they want, while the ones who are not favored become weaker and are less able to do what they want. Therefore, researchers should devote themselves to studying how the news slants in certain instances and whether it follows recurring patterns that promote bias by helping some political actors regularly win out over others (Entman, 2007).

While both the unified and multiple theory approaches have their benefits to the development of framing, scholars also point out that there has been some lack of clarity in the way framing is conceptualized and operationalized, which has led to the formation of potentially conflicting framing research approaches (Scheufele, 1999; Borah, 2011). Borah (2011) conducted a content analysis of framing research from 1997 to 2007 and determined that future framing research should, in addition to examining specific framing issues or effects, connect with the broader understanding of framing to facilitate the development and growth of the theory. This can be accomplished by adhering to a standardized model of framing and by operationalizing frames in the context of previous studies.

Scheufele (1999) contributed a standardized model by developing a process model of framing research. The model has four steps: frame building, frame setting, individual-level effects of framing and journalists as audiences. Each step moves framing through a continuum of inputs, processes and outcomes and takes into account both media frames and audience frames. The process works as follows: Organizational pressures (i.e. newsroom structure), journalist characteristics (i.e. political affiliation) and external sources (i.e. political actors or interest groups) influence frame building, which

leads to the creation of media frames. Next, frame setting occurs when salience is given to certain issue attributes and transmitted through the media text, which influences the audience frames of the receiver. Then the individual-level effects of framing lead to attributions of responsibility and behaviors in response to the communication. Finally, the individual outcomes are linked to the media frames through a feedback loop that suggests journalists are susceptible to the same frames they use to describe issues. Journalists and elites pick up on the frames used within the news media and proliferate their use, creating a “news wave” (p. 117). This research study focuses on the frame setting portion of this process – when salience is given to certain parts of an issue through news coverage.

Generic Frames

Forthcoming research on framing should take care to operationalize frames according to the literature. There is some inconsistency among scholars about how frames should be identified in the news. Scholars agree that frames are “specific textual and visual elements or ‘framing devices’” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). They are different from the other portion of a news story, which deVreese identifies as “core news facts” (p. 54). Cappella and Jamieson’s (1997) criteria for frames requires them to be identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics, commonly observed in journalistic practice, distinguishable from other frames and easily recognizable by others. However, some of the frames used in prior research have been issue-specific, while others have been generic (de Vreese, 2005). Issue-specific frames are limited to individual issues or events. These types of frames make it difficult for a study to be generalized or for the results to be compared with other framing studies. De Vreese also says issue-specific studies can run

the risk of “too easily finding evidence for what they are looking for” (p. 55), and can lead to the creation of different frames for each new study. Generic frames, on the other hand, have been identified in a variety of news coverage areas. Neuman et al. (1992) identified the generic frames of human impact, powerlessness, economics, moral values and conflict as commonly used frames in a study of articles on current events. Since the frames were found in relation to different issues, they can be accepted as generically applicable, unlike issue-specific frames, which could not be generalized to other studies. Additionally, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five generic news frames: conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, morality and economic consequences. Their study found that the attribution of responsibility frame was used the most, followed by conflict and economic consequences.

Generic frames are more generalizable, so they are better suited for quantitative research studies testing hypotheses because they can be compared across sources, types and periods of time (Matthes, 2009). Because of this, the current study will also examine the news coverage of public education using generic frames.

H₁: The same generic frames identified in previous research on other topics will also be found in a majority of the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind.

Iyengar (1991) conducted an analysis of U.S. news coverage on a variety of social issues and found the presence of episodic and thematic generic frames. Episodic frames, which were found more often than thematic frames, depicted issues as individual or event-specific, which allows the audience to understand them by relating to a person or group (Iyengar, 1991). Episodic frames tend to attribute responsibility or blame to

individuals or a group rather than the greater society. Thematic frames are less personal and generally place the story in a broader societal context. Iyengar concluded that journalistic norms, such as the standards of news production, support episodic framing because episodic allows the media to simplify complex issues through anecdotal evidence. However, focusing on the individual episode can also distract the audience from larger issues that contribute to problems or lead to the omission of solutions that could help. Additional studies of episodic versus thematic framing have determined that the news media tend to unfairly treat certain topics, such as crime, as episodes or one-time events rather than ongoing issues with solutions (Rodgers & Thorson, 2001).

H₂: Episodic frames will be used more often than thematic frames in the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind.

H₃: News articles about public education that are framed as episodes will also include an attribution of responsibility, or blame, frame more frequently than articles that are thematic.

News Framing of Crises

The recent literature on framing provides examples of frames found in the news coverage of a variety of issues that become crises. Research in this area also provides methodological guidance for future study of the way crises are framed in the news, including potentially manufactured crises, like the so-called public education crisis.

An and Gower (2009) studied the framing of crisis situations in three U.S. newspapers through a content analysis using five generic frames tested in previous studies. They defined crisis as it is explained in the crisis communication literature as “an

event for which people seek causes and make attributions” (p. 107). Other scholars have added to this definition the idea that a crisis is “a moment of special danger” (Farhi, 2012). Media coverage of crises allows audiences the ability to seek information, evaluate the cause and assign responsibility for an issue. Therefore, it is important to look at how media frame crises, because the frames can influence people’s perception of an issue or the organization that may be perceived as causing it. Through their analysis, An and Gower tested the generic frames of attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, economic and morality. The human interest frame provides a human face to a story or gives it an emotional angle, which influences the reader’s emotional response. The conflict frame highlights disagreement between groups. The morality frame introduces morals, social remedies or religious beliefs into a story either through quotations or inference. The economic frame reports issues in terms of the financial consequences. And finally, the attribution of responsibility frame assigns responsibility to either the government, an organization or an individual (An & Gower, 2009).

Chyi, Lewis and Zheng (2011) examined the way U.S. newspapers framed a situation that had been defined as a crisis, the financial issues confronting their own industry. Similar to the way other institutions including public education have been defined as in crisis, the newspaper business has been characterized as in a decline due to decreased circulation and advertising revenue. The study examines the news coverage of the newspaper crisis using six generic frames: media economics data, historical/economic context, sources, assignment of blame, sensational language and optimistic or pessimistic impression of the status of the industry. A content analysis was conducted of newspaper articles in *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *The New York Times* between 2008

and 2010. The study also examined whether these three newspapers use framing differently. The results showed that newspaper coverage of their own financial crisis focused on the short-term instead of the historical perspective, provided little contextual information, and favored elites, such as top management, as sources (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011). These characteristics could affect how the public perceives the newspaper industry. Some coverage exaggerated the crisis and created a false impression that the newspaper industry is dying (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011). The results of the study show that newspapers seem to have covered the issue superficially. In addition, the comparison of the newspapers show symmetry in the way *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* covered the issue, even though conventional wisdom would expect to find the results different since the papers are perceived to have a different focus and style (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011).

Chyi, Lewis and Zheng's study offered some additional insights into the way newspapers cover stories about organizations that are perceived to be in crisis. The articles they analyzed included emotional imagery that was witty, yet sensational, which led to the question of whether the coverage made the situation seem worse than it actually was. Prior studies have shown evidence that journalism tends to favor episodic frames, drama or conflict and even sensationalism or "tabloidization" (p. 13). The scholars anchor their discussion of the financial coverage in the assumption that good journalism is grounded in objectivity and the truth-seeking imperative. According to Chyi, Lewis and Zheng, journalists are to present the news with "facts, not emotions, assumptions or opinions" (p. 3). Therefore, whether journalists are covering their own industry or another area of public interest, such as education, their reports should be grounded in

facts instead of emotions. News media maintain trust by reporting in a way that is fact and context-based instead of sensationalized (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011).

H₄: The news coverage of No Child Left Behind frames public education as *in crisis* by using conflict and sensationalism more than historical data, comparative facts and solutions.

RQ₁: Will there be differences in the ways *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* frame the supposed education crisis?

News Coverage of Education

Scholars point out that there are few topics that directly affect more people than public education (Hynds, 1981; 1989; Farhi, 2012). Most Americans have attended public school during their lives and anyone who pays taxes has a financial stake in the education system. Therefore, the news coverage of education is crucial to the public's understanding of how the institution is doing in order to make informed judgments about its performance. The studies of news coverage of education have focused mostly on the number of reporters assigned to cover education or how many stories are published (or are not published) on the subject (Hynds, 1981; 1989). Nonetheless, these studies report that newspaper coverage of education has improved since the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report in 1983 called *A Nation at Risk*, which highlighted concerns with public education in the U.S. Despite this increased interest, news coverage of education has largely been ignored in scholarly research, so a study is needed to provide more research in this area.

Hynds (1981; 1989) conducted two surveys of U.S. daily newspaper editors on the status of education coverage in their publications. In the first survey, many of the editors reported that they had expanded or improved their coverage and were devoting at least 5 percent of their newshole to articles on education. However, fewer than half of newspapers surveyed had one person assigned fulltime to the education beat, and only one-fourth had an education editor. Hynds' (1989) second survey found that most education reporters had limited experience covering the beat. Seventy-three percent of reporters had covered education for fewer than five years. Twenty-five percent had been on the beat for one year or less. Hynds concluded that most daily newspapers in the U.S. improved and expanded their education coverage since his first survey, but newspapers still were not allocating the appropriate amount of staff or space to education. Education has been quipped "the beat nobody wants: Everyone says education is important – but you wouldn't know it from reading most papers" (p. 692).

Johns, Brownlie and Ramirez (1986) analyzed about 500 articles from newspapers in three countries to compare how education is covered in the news. The *Chicago Tribune*, the U.S. newspaper included in the study, covered budget, corruption, politics, student concerns and editorials/response articles most frequently. Standards, evaluation, test scores and curriculum were under-covered. The authors concluded that the focus on politics and corruption would divert the public's focus away from what happens in classrooms and the topics that would raise awareness of how to improve the quality of education. DeRiemer (1988) content analyzed education articles from newspapers that had won multiple awards from the Education Writers Association and from newspapers that had not won awards consistently. She found few differences in

their education coverage. Award-winning newspapers did not publish more stories, provide better placement or cover more education-related topics than non-award winning papers. However, the award-winners did publish longer stories and more locally bylined articles about education.

More recent inventories of the news coverage of education estimate that only 1.4 percent of U.S. news coverage in 2009 was about education (*American Teacher*, 2010). According to a study by the Brookings Institute, the stories that did appear focused primarily on budget issues, school crime and the H1N1 outbreak. They covered central issues on improving education, including standards, assessment and teacher quality sparingly. Online coverage is becoming more extensive than broadcast and print coverage in major news outlets, such as *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *MSNBC*. The education coverage was critiqued for lacking in supporting data; journalists who cover education stories should draw on research the way healthcare reporters use medical research in their stories (*American Teacher*, 2010).

The most recent examination of public education news coverage criticizes the media for its reporting on the supposed crisis in education and failing schools. Farhi (2012) argues that the education system in the U.S. has made important academic improvements, yet media coverage of schools presents them as "broken," "failing" and in "crisis" (p. 1). Reports by prominent news organizations call for schools to be fixed and give weight to the commentary of school reformers without questioning their motive, qualifying their comments with data or balancing their input with that of educators.

Several important academic measures point toward improvements in America's education system. Elementary and middle school students have improved their

performance on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science assessment every four years since the test began in 1995 (Farhi, 2012). American scores are above average on the test and are within a few percentage points of the global leaders (Farhi, 2012). Additionally, the number of Americans with some college education has increased from 10 percent in 1940 to 56 percent in 2012 (Farhi, 2012). Despite these measures, the prevailing narrative in the media is that the nation's education system is in crisis, schools are failing, teachers are ineffective and reform is needed (Farhi, 2012).

Farhi conducted a search of news articles with the phrase "failing schools" and found 544 articles in newspapers and wire stories for just the month of January 2012. This represents a proliferation of the use of the phrase in news coverage of education in the past 20 years. Farhi also searched January 1992 and found only 13 instances of the phrase. His review of the articles discovered that reporters did not define failing for their audience when using the phrase "failing schools" but assumed it was commonly understood. The articles also used the term "ineffective teachers" 137 times and seemed to place the blame for schools' failure on teachers. Farhi identified a "lack of balance and historical context" and "willingness to accept the most generic and even inflammatory characterizations at face value" as flaws in education news coverage (p. 2). He also said reporters have not provided their audiences with "a broader frame to assess the extent of the alleged problems, and the likelihood that the proposed responses will succeed" (p. 2). Additionally, he says reporters rely on secondary sources, such as politicians, school reformers and labor leaders, instead of educators, perhaps due to issues with access to schools as they become more cautious about their image in light of negative news coverage. When using these secondary sources, reporters have not done their due

diligence to fact-check the rhetoric presented on school reform specifically. Reform leaders like Michelle Rhee, former Chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, and Microsoft founder Bill Gates have been given preference as sources without input from sources with alternative viewpoints (Farhi, 2012).

Farhi defines crisis as "a moment of special danger" (p. 3) and questions the use of the term, because concern for the performance of the nation's schools is not a new phenomenon. He reports that concerns about education date back to the 19th century when business leaders of the time were worried schools were not producing graduates with the right training for industrial jobs. This concern is currently of popular interest to politicians and high-tech businesses as the U.S. struggles with the unemployment rate and economic recession.

H₅: A *failing public schools* theme that promotes the idea that schools are in crisis will be found in a majority of the news coverage of public education since *No Child Left Behind*.

News Framing of Public Education

While there has been a considerable amount of research on framing, particularly in the news coverage of political issues, there is much less research about the framing of public education. Social issues, such as poverty and crime have also received frequent attention in the framing literature, but public education framing has been studied much less often (Briggs, 2012). Of the research that is available, much of it is qualitative research. With just a couple of quantitative studies available, additional research is needed.

Gerstl-Pepin (2002) conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of newspaper and broadcast stories on education from four months leading up to the 2000 presidential election. Her analysis examined whether education issues were misrepresented in the news coverage and whether dominant interests were favored over the viewpoints of less powerful groups. Gerstl-Pepin describes the media as a “thin public,” meaning that genuine dialogue about the issues does not take place (p. 39). Instead, opposing viewpoints are presented, but no chance is provided for the issues to be analyzed in the public sphere. According to Gerstl-Pepin, research is needed in this area, because the media is one of the public’s primary sources of information on government issues and its credibility depends on its ability to present issues objectively and impartially.

Her analysis found that the media provided shallow depictions of education issues during the presidential campaign. The media tend to simplify issues as “either/or” choices as opposed to the complex situations that they are (p. 44). Gerstl-Pepin provides the example of the coverage of school accountability. News stories present the issue as two-sided: groups are either for or against testing. However, the news coverage does not present the complex questions surrounding the use of standardized tests to measure student achievement, whether they are valid, whether they are racially or culturally biased, whether they promote teaching to the test, etc. This oversimplification of the issue portrays it as “fixable” under policies of the federal government (p. 38), and the superficial presentation minimizes the societal factors that impact educational success, such as poverty and historical discrimination. She also found evidence of a strong focus on conflict. Scholars recognize that conflict may be a journalistic preference on the premise that controversy is interesting and newsworthy.

Gerstl-Pepin's analysis also found that students, parents, teachers and other educators were excluded from the dialogue and thus could not take part in defining the issues. The educational issues presented in the news media were mostly defined by the candidates. Gerstl-Pepin stops short of suggesting that the media overtly misrepresent certain groups, but media follow "tacit cultural assumptions and meanings" that could lead to the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups, especially minority groups or the economically disadvantaged (p. 40). Without a variety of perspectives, the news on education was not presented objectively during the presidential campaign.

Dowman and Mills (2008) conducted interviews with educators from four schools in New Zealand to study the way they made sense of newspaper articles that addressed responsibly and accountability in education. The interviews revealed four interpretive repertoires: defensive, empathetic, cynical and collaborative. Dowman and Mills identified the "blame culture" (p. 1) as evident in the print media coverage related to education. Regardless of repertoire used, all participants were sensitive to the blame culture promoted in the news articles and said they actively accounted for it in their professional practice. The study also raised the question of whether the 1989 Education Reform Act in New Zealand may have intensified the blame culture by promoting certain norms about accountability and responsibility.

Cohen (2010) conducted a discourse analysis of education news articles from the Chicago Tribune from 2006 to 2007 to study the frames of teacher identity. More than 75 percent of the articles employed accountability language, meaning that the authority in education was presented as the institutions that provide oversight to schools rather than the schools themselves. Cohen says this diminishes the perceived expertise and

knowledge of the individuals who are closest to the daily educational activity in schools. He also says teacher professional identity is most often formed by those who talk about teachers rather than the teachers themselves. Cohen also found that schools were positioned as the “objects of evaluation rather than as active agents” through the use of words and phrases such as “fail,” “miss the mark” and “have trouble” (p. 111). Syntax such as “schools...landed” implies that schools actively put themselves in a position of failure and ignores the role other factors may have played. Similar sentence constructions establish students and teachers as the “objects of others’ evaluation” and associate them with failure (p. 111). In sum, the language leads to the construction of the educational crisis in which schools are failing and institutional solutions are required.

Goldstein (2011) conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of how frames of teachers’ unions were shaped in the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine* from 2001 to 2008. Analysis of the articles showed that the discourse blamed teachers for the failure of the education system and portrayed teachers’ unions as bullies. The analysis also conveyed the idea that young teachers are better teachers (assuming older teachers are probably opposed to No Child Left Behind and are part of a union). On the other hand, school reformers are presented as serious brokers who are ready to sweep out the bad teachers and not let anything stand in the way of academic achievement. Goldstein asserts that this discourse promotes the idea that public education is in need of an overhaul and that laws like No Child Left Behind can fix the situation. Additionally, media coverage of public education does little to challenge what people currently believe. It fails to provide the public with alternative frames that could help them better understand how issues could be resolved (Goldstein, 2011).

Tamir and Davidson (2011) examined how the media shape education policy debates by conducting a quantitative content analysis of news articles from New Jersey in 1985 when many educational reform policies were introduced. The study showed the importance of the media in framing debates on public education, which had been largely ignored in educational literature before this research. The results of the content analysis showed that using Iyengar's (1991) framework, the news coverage was more episodic than thematic, solidifying the power of political elites and insulating them from public scrutiny. Tamir and Davidson (2011) characterize education as a field largely influenced by political and economic elites who are aware of the power of mass media and use it to their benefit. Previous evidence shows that episodic framing can lead to the public blaming issues on individuals or particular groups without holding the government responsible for societal problems (Iyengar, 1991). Tamir and Davidson (2011) also found strong evidence of a conflict tone, which research has shown to produce cynical reactions in audiences (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The conflict frames presented tension in the debates while allowing the New Jersey governor in 1985, an elite actor, to "stay above the fray" (Tamir & Davidson, 2011, p. 234). Teachers or other educators who tended to oppose the policies presented by the political actors, were given minimal print space to provide an alternative viewpoint.

Briggs (2012) provided an additional step forward in the literature on the framing of public education with a study of the connection between news frames and the attribution of blame in newspaper articles that discussed "failing public schools" (p. 2). She conducted a quantitative content analysis of 107 newspaper articles from the *Houston Chronicle* from 2000 to 2010 and found evidence that the type of frame used in a story

affects the likelihood that blame will also be included. Briggs identified her frames according to Iyengar's (1991) analysis of episodic and thematic frames and also frames from an information bias study. The four frames included were a personalized news frame, a political frame, a policy frame and a "policy with context" frame (Briggs, 2012, p. 6). The first three frames were classified as episodic and the policy with context frame was classified as thematic and served as the control in the analysis. A positive and statistically significant relationship was found between the presence of blame in an article and the personalized and policy frames. A statistically significant relationship was not found for the political frame. Also, the personalized news frame provided the highest probability of blame attribution of all the frames. Briggs' findings are generally consistent with previous research indicating that blame attribution is more likely to be found with episodic frames than with thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991; Briggs, 2012). Briggs calls for future research on the subjects attributed with blame in stories covering failing schools.

Since little quantitative information was known previously about the framing of education news, Briggs' study provided an important step for scholarly research on this topic. However, more research will be needed to further explore education framing and to provide scientific depth to this study. One of the drawbacks of Briggs' research is a lack of explication based on the foundational research on the theory. A more robust grounding in the literature is needed in order to respond to the call of previous framing scholars for a more consistent approach (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Matthes, 2009; Borah, 2011). This is imperative in order to advance the theoretical approach of framing in communication research and to provide stronger evidence of the way framing works

within the news coverage of education. A second drawback of this particular study is unknown information about the validity of the results. Aspects such as intercoder reliability for the content analysis need to be reported (Matthes, 2009).

H₆: The news coverage of No Child Left Behind presents an overall impression or tone of pessimism about the status of public education in the U.S.

In conclusion, framing would be the appropriate theoretical approach to use in a study of public education news coverage, because framing research has shown that it can provide evidence for how things are communicated and what effect it may have on an audience (McQuail, 2010). Evidence exists that stories about education are framed according to generic frames identified in the literature (Tamir and Davidson, 2011; Farhi, 2012; Briggs, 2012), and more information is needed about how those frames are impacting the reality that is disseminated about public schools in the U.S. Generic frames have also been helpful in describing how issues are framed in situations that are defined as crises (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011), and these same frames should be examined in the news coverage of the supposed education crisis. If certain frames are found to be present in the education news coverage, they could provide evidence for the way newspapers might be shaping their coverage of public schools. It is important to bring these frames to light and particularly make educators aware of them, since frames have been shown to influence the perceived reality among the public.

In summary, to study the news framing of public education with regard to No Child Left Behind, the following hypotheses and research question are derived from previous literature:

H₁: The same generic frames identified in previous research on other topics will also be found in a majority of the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind.

H₂: Episodic frames will be used more often than thematic frames in the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind.

H₃: News articles about public education that are framed as episodes will also include an attribution of responsibility, or blame, frame more frequently than articles that are thematic.

H₄: The news coverage of No Child Left Behind frames public education as in crisis by using conflict and sensationalism more than historical data, comparative facts and solutions.

H₅: A *failing public schools* theme that promotes the idea that schools are in crisis will be found in a majority of the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind.

H₆: The news coverage of No Child Left Behind presents an overall impression or tone of pessimism about the status of public education in the U.S.

RQ₁: Will there be differences in the ways *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* frame the supposed education crisis?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The hypotheses and research question presented from the literature were studied through a quantitative content analysis of the news coverage of public education. The study examined the frames used in the news coverage of public education in the U.S. since No Child Left Behind and the use of the failing public schools theme as a narrative that characterizes public education as in crisis. A quantitative content analysis is the best method to use for this study, because content analysis is an effective way to review a text systematically to learn about frames included in a representative sample of articles. According to Entman (1993) frames are found in texts and are created by the presence (or absence) of certain words, phrases, stereotyped images, sources or clusters of thematically reinforcing facts or judgments. Content analysis provides the method that can be used to review those words, phrases and images and draw conclusions or test hypotheses using the data that is found.

Sample

Articles were sampled for the analysis from the three U.S. newspapers with the largest circulations: *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *The New York Times*. These newspapers were selected due to their broad circulations and varying specialties. Additionally, many content analyses have used these newspapers as the basis for their research. *The Wall Street Journal* has a circulation of more than 2 million each day of the week and focuses on business news (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012). *USA Today* has

the second-largest circulation with an average circulation of 1.8 million and appeals to a wide customer base with its colorful layouts and graphics (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012). *The New York Times* has an average weekday circulation of 1.5 million and a circulation of 2 million on Sundays (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012). It is a prominent newspaper nationally and is noted particularly for its role in setting the agenda for what gets covered in other media outlets, including newspapers and broadcast. By using all three publications for the content analysis, this study can include a national perspective while also allowing room to explore the framing differences that may be found between newspapers (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011). Newspapers are particularly well suited for studies of the news coverage of education, because education receives a higher level of coverage in newspapers than in other types of news media. As of 2012, education accounted for 4.5 percent of the newshole in newspapers but only 1.6 percent of the overall newshole including broadcast media (Edmonds, Guskin, Rosentiel & Mitchell, 2012).

All relevant articles about public education in the United States that include the words “No Child Left Behind” and were published by *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *The New York Times* between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2012 were included in the universe of articles available for this study. Letters to the editor and articles that did not discuss public schools in the U.S. as their primary topic were not included. Articles from *USA Today* and *The New York Times* were collected through the Lexis Nexis online database. Lexis Nexis does not archive articles from *The Wall Street Journal*, so those articles were collected through the Factiva online database. The years selected as the universe for this study, 2001 through 2012, provide a sample of articles

starting with the year No Child Left Behind was legislated and continuing through the most recent full calendar year. After the articles were screened for letters to the editor and articles that did not have U.S. public schools as the primary topic, the total number of articles was 1,587 for the timeframe: 241 from *The Wall Street Journal*, 374 from *USA Today*, and 972 from *The New York Times*. A representative sample of articles was randomly selected to achieve a confidence level of 95 percent and a margin of error of \pm 8 percent for each newspaper. The random sample included 92 articles from *The Wall Street Journal*, 109 articles from *USA Today* and 131 articles from *The New York Times* for a total of 332 articles.

Frame Explication

After the articles are gathered for the sample, they were reviewed through a content analysis to examine the frames used to describe public education. Content analysis is an efficient way to analyze media to learn about what is included in its content, and it allows for a systematic, objective and quantitative way to measure variables (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). In the case of this study, the content analysis helps identify what frames exist in the news coverage of public education and provides the data needed to run statistical analyses for evaluating the hypotheses.

Generic frames have been identified in a variety of news coverage areas. They are more generalizable, so they are better suited for quantitative research studies testing hypotheses, because they can be compared across sources, types and periods of time (Matthes, 2009). Therefore this study looks for the generic frames described below through the content analysis:

Episodic

The episodic frame will be identified according to Iyengar's (1991) description. News stories are framed as episodes when they depict issues as individual or event-specific instances and are not connected to a broader context. These stories may focus on a one-time event or on one group or person rather than a succession of events or society as a whole. They also may use the story of a person to provide a human interest or emotional connection an issue. Episodic stories may attribute responsibility to one person, group or cause rather than exploring a range of possible causes or providing solutions. An example of an episodic news story about education might be a story that reports test scores for a school district and attributes the low scores to poor teacher quality in the district without exploring other possible causes, such as high poverty or a new type of test question. Stories will be identified as episodic if the story topic covered is a one-time event, if the story's content uses a person as a human interest or emotional hook and the story's content assigns responsibility to a specific person, group or cause.

Thematic

The thematic frame will also be identified by Iyengar's (1991) description. In contrast with episodic stories, thematic news stories connect their content to the broader context of issues. They speak of larger bodies, such as whole institutions, countries or groups of people to explain a larger issue instead of using single events or people. These stories usually have less of a personal focus. They cover ongoing issues and may offer solutions (Rodgers & Thorson, 2001). An example of a thematic news story about education could be a story reporting on the relationship between levels of childhood

homelessness and statewide test scores, including an explanation of other economic and diversity factors that change over time. Stories will be identified as thematic if the story topic covered is an ongoing issue or series of events, the story's content speaks of institutions or groups holistically and causes or solutions are offered to provide a broader context to the story.

Attribution of Responsibility/Blame

The Attribution of Responsibility/Blame frame has been identified in a variety of framing research and will be defined as assigning responsibility or blaming an issue on a certain person, cause, group or institution (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; An & Gower, 2009; Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011; Dowman & Mills, 2008; Briggs, 2012). According to Entman (1993), explaining cause is one of the most important elements of how media communicate issues to the public, but blame assignment can influence an audience's perception of the cause related to an issue (Chyi, Lewis and Zheng, 2011). An example of attribution of responsibility/blame in a news story about education might be a description in the story of how low test scores were the result of poor teacher quality, meaning teachers were to blame for the scores. Attribution of responsibility/blame will be identified by the text of the story, either in story facts or quotations.

Conflict

Conflict will be identified in the stories as disagreement between individuals, groups or organizations (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; An & Gower, 2009; Gerstl-Pepin, 2002; Tamir & Davidson, 2011). An example of conflict in a

story about education might be a teacher's union disagreeing with a governor about a new merit-based payscale for teachers or a board of education in disagreement with school district staff members about how to administer a new technology program. Conflict will be identified in stories by the text naming two or more groups and describing a disagreement between them.

Sensationalism

Sensationalism in the stories will be identified based on descriptions by Rodgers and Thorson (2001) and Chyi, Lewis and Zheng (2011). It will be defined as emotional or dramatic descriptions or imagery that are meant to get the audience's attention and shock or exaggerate. Sensational language goes beyond factual information and plays off the emotions. It moves away from objectivity and on toward assumptions or opinions. An example of sensationalism in a news story about education could be the use of the words "students bombed the test" instead of the more factual "students received failing scores on the test." Sensationalism will be identified in the stories by the story text containing descriptions that use exclamatory or emotional words rather than straightforward, factual words.

Context (Historical Data, Comparative Facts and Solutions)

Stories that are framed in context provide data, historical information, definitions or explanations of solutions that help provide a framework for understanding an issue (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011; Farhi, 2012; Briggs, 2012). News stories should provide contextual background information in order to present a fair and balanced report on an

issue. (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011). An example of context in a news story about education could be a comparison of current test scores to test scores over a span of 30 years, definitions for the terms “failing” or “low-performing,” or an explanation of how afterschool programs correlate with higher homework completion rates. Context will be identified in the stories as any time a factual piece of information, data point, definition or solution is included in the text of the article.

Sources

Sources are the people or organizations selected to provide facts and commentary in a news story. Sources may be identified through quotations or through attribution for a piece of information or an indirect quote. The selection of sources provides insight into what a reporter deems to be important or who is seen as credible (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011). Prior research shows that some sources tend to be used more often than others, which could marginalize some weaker voices (Farhi, 2012; Gerstl-Pepin, 2002; Tamir & Davidson, 2011). An example of a source in a news story about education could be a teacher who is quoted, a report by a think tank that provides a data point, or a politician who is quoted indirectly as presenting an idea for a new education program. Sources will be identified in the stories any time a quote is attributed to someone, a group or publication is named as the source of a fact, or a person or group is credited as being the owner of an idea. Many times, news articles identify sources by quotation marks or the word “says” or “said.”

Failing Public Schools Theme

The *failing public schools* theme is defined either by individual words or phrases of multiple words including but not limited to “failing schools,” “broken education system,” “ineffective,” “defeated,” “in crisis,” “miss the mark,” “in trouble,” “ineffective teachers,” or “reform is needed.” This theme uses individual words and descriptions to present the idea that there is something wrong with the way schools are performing currently and that they need to be fixed or else the future will be in danger. The theme could also be conveyed through claims made about charter or private schools being better than public schools without any data to support the claim. The *failing public schools* theme will be identified by the words provided above or any other words, phrases or explanations that convey the same meaning.

Coding

The unit of analysis for this study is the news article. Individual news articles were identified as a text that contains a headline, byline (if present), body paragraphs and any captions or data tables that are directly related to the topic of the text. The code sheet used for the analysis of each article (see Appendix A) was developed with an a priori coding system – one that is developed before the research – based on the literature of news framing and the operational definitions of the frames examined through the study. A codebook was also created (see Appendix B) to accompany the code sheet. It includes explanations of all parts of the code sheet and the operational definitions of the frames so it is clear what a reader should look for while doing the analysis.

Two coders were trained on how to conduct the content analysis using the code sheet and codebook. The articles in the sample were randomly assigned to each reader, and the readers conducted the content analysis by completing an electronic version of the code sheet for each article. To ensure that intercoder reliability was achieved, both coders overlapped on 62 of the articles from the sample (about 19 percent). It is recommended that intercoder reliability be tested on a 10 to 25 percent overlap of articles when conducting a content analysis (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The intercoder reliability was calculated according to Krippendorff's alpha (α) by using a macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2007). Krippendorff's alpha (α) is an especially effective measure of reliability due to its flexibility with regard to the number of coders, levels of measurement, sample sizes and missing data (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The reliability and percent agreement for each variable are listed in Table 1 except for two variables, context and sensationalism, which had no variation in the reliability sample and therefore did not return an alpha value. The overall average reliability of all variables is .9593. Intercoder reliability coefficients of 0.90 or greater are always acceptable, and coefficients of 0.80 or greater are acceptable in most situations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The coefficients for all of the variables were .83 and above.

Table 1: Intercoder Reliability Results

Variable	Percent Agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha (α)
Attribution of Responsibility/Blame	98.3%	.9590
Conflict	98.3%	.9647
Episodic/Thematic	98.3%	.9554
Broken	100%	1.0000
Crisis	98.3%	.8812
Failing	100%	1.0000
Ineffective	100%	1.0000
Reform	100%	1.0000
Other Words	93.5%	.8327
Tone	100%	1.0000

Data Analysis

When the coding of the articles was complete, the data from the code sheets was transferred to a spreadsheet so statistical analyses could be run using the SPSS software program. The data analysis included both descriptive statistics, which provided basic information on percentages, and inferential statistics, which helped test some hypotheses that needed a measure of statistical significance in order to generalize the results to a larger population (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Many of the measures in this study are nominal or ordinal, so frequencies, cross tabulation, chi-square tests and a one-sample t-test were conducted to analyze the results. These tests help determine whether the hypotheses can be supported and whether the results are statistically significant.

By conducting a content analysis, this research study is aimed at providing additional quantitative data in support of the literature of news framing generally and the framing of public education more specifically. Scholars have pointed to the need for more quantitative studies, and especially studies that test hypotheses, since the framing

literature includes many instances of qualitative framing research (Matthes, 2009). If the hypotheses are supported, this study will provide evidence to support what discourse analysis, interviews and observations have already found – that the prevailing narrative in news coverage of public education is that schools are failing and in crisis. This data would support the questions proposed at the beginning of the study and provide the opportunity for future research to be conducted.

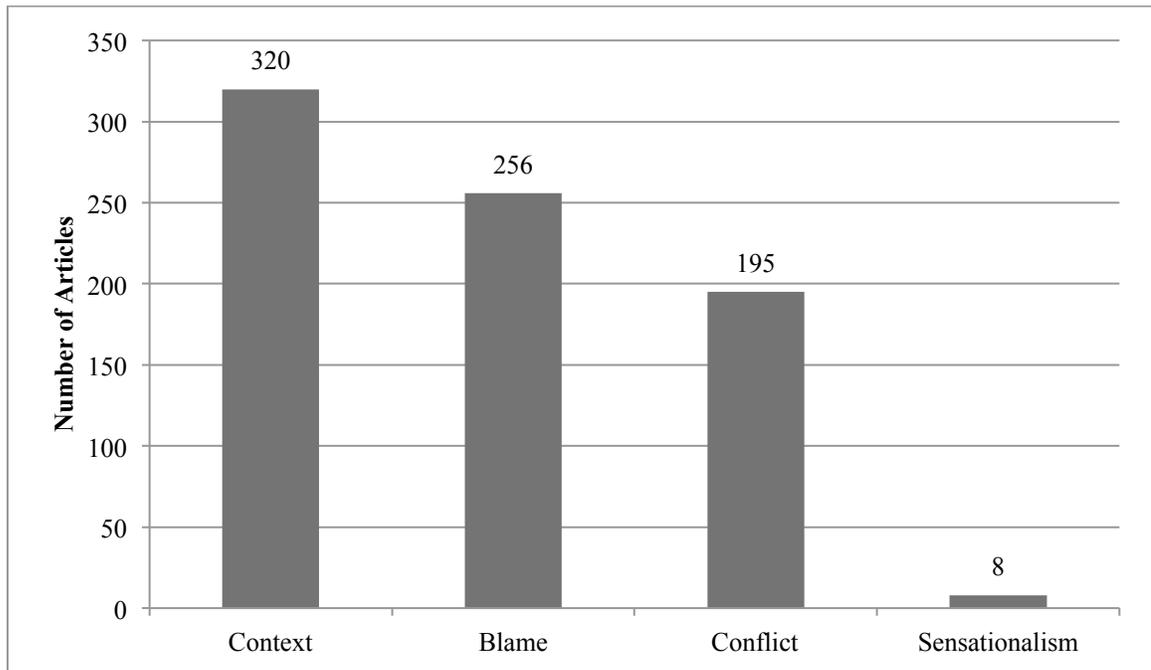
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This research study content analyzed the news coverage of No Child Left Behind published by three national newspapers to examine the news frames used in the coverage of public education in the U.S. A random sample of the population of articles mentioning No Child Left Behind between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2012 yielded 131 articles from *The New York Times*, 92 articles from *The Wall Street Journal* and 109 articles from *USA Today*. The total sample size was 332 articles.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that the same generic frames identified in previous research studies on a variety of topics would also be found in a majority of the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind. In the content analysis, coders were asked to identify whether or not four generic frames – attribution of responsibility/blame, conflict, context and sensationalism – were used in each news article. The results of the analysis showed that at least one of these frames was identified in all but one of the articles. The attribution of responsibility/blame frame was found in 77.1 percent of the articles ($n = 256$), conflict was found in 58.7 percent of the articles ($n = 195$), sensationalism was found in 2.4 percent of the articles ($n = 8$) and context was found in 96.4 percent of the articles ($n = 320$). Figure 1 compares the frequency of each of these frames. Sensationalism was the only generic frame that was not found in a majority of the news coverage.

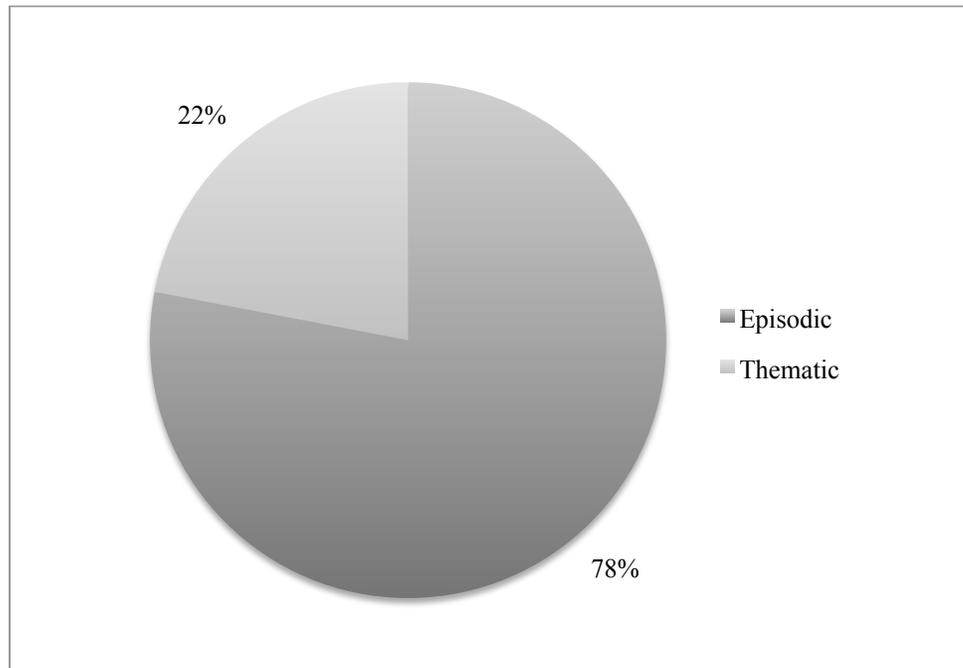
Figure 1: Frequency of Generic Frames



Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis suggested episodic frames would be used more often than thematic frames in the news coverage of public education, as has been the case in prior framing studies on other topics. The episodic frame was identified in 78 percent of the articles (n= 259) and the thematic frame was found in 22 percent of the articles (n = 73). Figure 2 illustrates the share of episodic versus thematic frames in the news articles examined.

Figure 2: Episodic vs. Thematic Frames



Hypothesis 3

Continuing to follow prior research on episodic and thematic frames, the third hypothesis predicted that news articles about public education that were framed as episodes would also include an attribution of responsibility/blame frame more often than articles framed as thematic. A crosstabulation of the attribution of responsibility/blame frame and the episodic/thematic frames showed that 77.2 percent of episodic articles (n = 200) included the attribution of responsibility/blame frame and 76.7 percent of thematic articles (n = 56) included attribution of responsibility/blame. Additionally, the crosstabulation showed that 22.8 percent of episodic articles did not include the attribution of responsibility/blame frame and 23.3 percent of thematic articles did not include attribution of responsibility/blame. Although a slightly higher percentage of episodic articles included attribution of responsibility, a chi-square analysis showed that

this difference is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 (1, n = 332) = .008, p = .927$). Table 2 shows the full results of the crosstabulation.

Table 2: Attribution of Responsibility/Blame * Episodic/Thematic Crosstabulation

			Episodic/Thematic		Total
			Episodic	Thematic	
Attribution of Responsibility/Blame	No	Count	59	17	76
		% within Episodic/Thematic	22.8%	23.3%	22.9%
	Yes	Count	200	56	256
		% within Episodic/Thematic	77.2%	76.7%	77.1%
Total	Count	259	73	332	
	% within Episodic/Thematic	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis suggested the news coverage of No Child Left Behind would include conflict and sensationalism frames more often than context frames that provide historical data, facts and/or solutions to help explain the topic being discussed. Conflict was found in 58.7 percent of the articles ($n = 195$) and sensationalism was found in 2.4 percent of the articles ($n = 8$). A frequency calculation for the number of articles that contain either a conflict or sensationalism frame is 60 percent ($n = 199$). The frequency for the number of articles that contain context is 96.4 percent ($n = 320$). Thus the hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 5

The fifth hypothesis proposed a new frame to be studied: a *failing public schools* theme. It was predicted that a majority of the news coverage would include a failing public schools theme as defined by the use of certain words or phrases that would be

found repeatedly throughout the articles, giving the failing schools theme salience, as explained by Entman (1993). The content analysis identified the words “failing,” “broken,” “ineffective,” “crisis” and “reform” in the articles, and asked readers to identify any other words or phrases with the same meaning that were found in the articles. “Failing” was identified in 57.0 percent of the articles (n = 150). “Reform” was found in 46.4 percent of the articles (n = 122). “Broken” and “crisis” were both identified in 4.2 percent of the articles (n = 11). “Ineffective” was found in 3.4 percent of the articles (n = 9). Additionally, other words and phrases with the same meaning were identified in 66.2 percent of the articles (n = 174). Some of the most frequently identified words or phrases in the “other” category were “overhaul” (n = 25); “low-achieving,” “low-performing,” “underachieving,” “worst-performing” or “under-performing” (n = 43); “troubled” (n = 21); “problem” (n = 16); “needs improvement” or “in need of improvement” (n = 15); “falling behind,” “falling short” or “falling apart” (n = 15); “struggling” (n = 11); and “lagging behind” (n = 5). Figure 3 depicts the frequencies of the other words and phrases identified using a word cloud.

Figure 3: Word Cloud of Other Words Identified in Failing Schools Theme

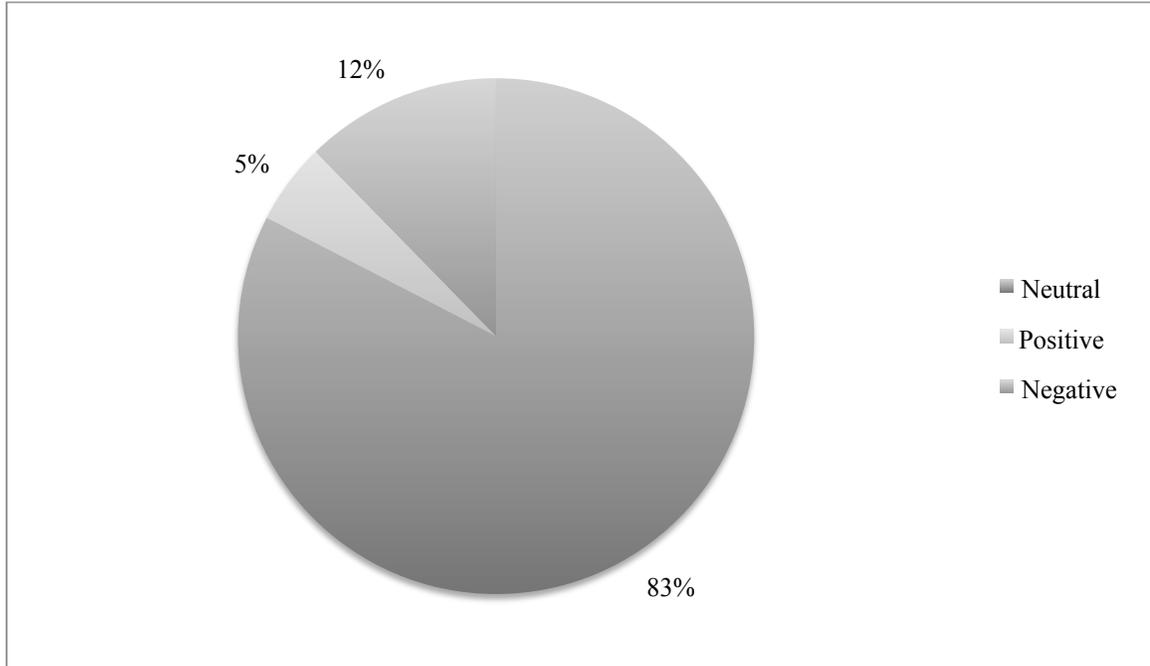


In total, one of the words listed above and/or another word or phrase with the same meaning was included in 79.2 percent of the articles (n = 263). More than one of the words was used per article on average (n = 477, compared with 332 articles in the sample).

Hypothesis 6

The final hypothesis said the news coverage of No Child Left Behind would present an overall impression or tone of pessimism about the status of public education in the U.S. The coders were asked to choose a tone for each article: negative, neutral or positive. The largest percentage of articles, 82.5 percent (n = 274), were neutral. Next in frequency, 12.3 percent of the articles (n = 41) were identified as negative, and finally 5.1 percent (n = 17) were positive (mean = .928, standard deviation = .4123). Figure 4 illustrates the share of negative, neutral and positive tone in the news articles examined.

Figure 4: Tone



A one-sample t-test analysis was conducted to determine how much these results differed from the expected mean of 1.0, or neutral. The results indicated a statistically significant difference favoring negative tone, one-sample $t(331) = -3.195$, $p = .002$. While the overall tone was most balanced, the negative news coverage still outweighed the positive to a significant enough degree that it could contribute to an impression of pessimism about public education.

Research Question 1

The research question asked whether the news coverage in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* would frame the supposed education crisis similarly. The sample of articles included 39.5 percent of articles ($n = 131$) from *The New York Times*, 27.7 percent ($n = 92$) from *The Wall Street Journal* and 32.8 percent ($n = 109$) from *USA Today*. A crosstabulation of the generic frames identified in the study and

the three newspapers, shown in Table 3, provides frequencies for how often the frames were identified in each newspaper.

Table 3: Frames * Newspapers Crosstabulation

		Newspaper			Total	
		<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	<i>USA Today</i>		
Frames	Attribution of Responsibility/Blame	Count	105	72	79	256
		% within NEWSPAPER	80.2%	78.3%	72.5%	
	Conflict	Count	78	56	61	195
		% within NEWSPAPER	59.5%	60.9%	56.0%	
	Sensationalism	Count	4	0	4	8
		% within NEWSPAPER	3.1%	0.0%	3.7%	
	Context	Count	126	91	103	320
		% within NEWSPAPER	96.2%	98.9%	94.5%	
	Total	Count	131	92	109	331

For attribution of responsibility/blame, the frequency of the frame was 80.2 percent (n = 105) for *The New York Times*, 78.3 percent (n = 72) for *The Wall Street Journal* and 72.5 percent (n = 79) for *USA Today*. *The New York Times* reported a slightly higher percentage of attribution of responsibility/blame than the other two newspapers, but the difference is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2, n = 332) = 2.082, p = .353$). For conflict, the frequency of the frame was 59.5 percent (n = 78) for *The New York Times*, 60.9 percent (n = 56) for *The Wall Street Journal* and 56.0 percent for *USA Today*. *The Wall Street Journal* reported a slightly higher percentage of conflict than the other two papers, but the difference is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2, n = 332) = .554,$

p = .758). For sensationalism, the frequency of the frame was 3.1 percent (n = 4) for *The New York Times*, 0.0 percent (n = 0) for *The Wall Street Journal* and 3.7 percent (n = 4) for *USA Today*. *The Wall Street Journal* reported a slightly lower percentage of sensationalism. A chi-square test was conducted to see if the difference is statistically significant (χ^2 (2, n = 332) = 3.238, p = .198). Significance was not found, and the results are not reliable since the sample size of articles with sensationalism was so small for each of the newspapers (3 cells (50.0%) had an expected count less than 5). For context, the frequency of the frame was 96.2 percent (n = 126) for *The New York Times*, 98.9 percent (n = 91) for *The Wall Street Journal* and 94.5 percent (n = 103) for *USA Today*. *The Wall Street Journal* reported a slightly higher percentage of context, but the difference is not statistically significant (χ^2 (2, n = 332) = 2.820, p = .244).

The frequency of episodic versus thematic frames was also analyzed for each of the three newspapers as shown in Table 4. As the table indicates, *USA Today* had a lower percentage of episodic articles and a higher percentage of thematic articles than *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, but the differences are not statistically significant (χ^2 (2, n = 332) = 2.020, p = .364).

Table 4: Episodic/Thematic * Newspaper Crosstabulation

			Newspaper		
			<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Episodic/Thematic	Episodic	Count	105	74	80
		% within Newspaper	80.2%	80.4%	73.4%
	Thematic	Count	26	18	29
		% within Newspaper	19.8%	19.6%	26.6%
Total	Count	131	92	109	
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Finally, the difference in the tone of the articles was analyzed for each of the three newspapers as shown in Table 5. *USA Today* reported both the highest percentages of negative and positive articles, while *The New York Times* reported the highest percentage of neutral articles. A chi-square analysis was conducted to determine if the differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 (4, n = 332) = 4.708, p = .319$). Significance was not found, and the results may not be reliable since the sample size of positive was small for *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Table 5: Tone * Newspaper Crosstabulation

		Newspaper			Total	
		<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	<i>USA Today</i>		
Tone	Negative	Count	14	11	16	41
		% within Newspaper	10.7%	12.0%	14.7%	12.3%
	Neutral	Count	113	77	84	274
		% within Newspaper	86.3%	83.7%	77.1%	82.5%
	Positive	Count	4	4	9	17
		% within Newspaper	3.1%	4.3%	8.3%	5.1%
Total	Count	131	92	109	332	
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Additional Results

In addition to the data analyzed for the hypotheses, three other variables were explored. One was the sources referenced in the articles. Coders were asked to identify the types of individuals and/or groups who were quoted or referenced for information in each article. Table 6 shows the frequencies at which certain individuals and groups were consulted as sources. Politicians were used as sources most frequently in the articles (61.1 percent, n = 203). They were followed by independent research/report (34.9

percent, n = 116) and school reformers/interested citizens (33.7 percent, n = 112). Table 6 provides the frequencies for all sources.

Table 6: Sources

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Teacher(s)	46	6.3%	13.9%
School District Administrator(s)	74	10.1%	22.3%
Parent(s)	21	2.9%	6.3%
Politician(s)	203	27.7%	61.1%
Student(s)	20	2.7%	6.0%
Union Representative(s)	58	7.9%	17.5%
Research or Report	116	15.8%	34.9%
School Reformer/Interested Citizen	112	15.3%	33.7%
University Professor/Researcher	14	1.9%	4.2%
Not Applicable	22	3.0%	6.6%
Other	47	6.4%	14.2%
Total	733	100.0%	220.8%

Sources were examined in comparison with the words identified for the failing public schools theme as well. The word “failing” occurred most frequently in articles that used school administrators as sources (55.4 percent), followed by unions (53.4 percent) and politicians (51.2 percent). “Failing” occurred with the least frequency in articles using independent research or reports as sources (39.7 percent). The frequencies were statistically significant (χ^2 (n = 310) = 21.009, p = .021). In contrast, the word “reform” was used most frequently in articles that included independent research or report as a source (42.4 percent), followed by unions (41.4 percent) and politicians (35.5 percent). Articles including parents as sources used it the least frequently (0 percent, none). These

results were statistically significant (χ^2 (n = 310) = 36.315, $p \leq .05$). Other words, such as “overhaul,” “low-performing” and “troubled,” were included most frequently in articles that used politicians as sources (61.6 percent), followed by school administrators (59.5 percent) and independent research or report (56.9 percent). Those words were included the least frequently in articles that used university professors as sources (35.7 percent). These results were also statistically significant (χ^2 (n = 310) = 26.667, $p = .003$).

In addition to sources, the coders also tallied the individuals and groups that were attributed responsibly or blamed in the articles. Table 7 shows the frequencies at which certain individuals or groups were blamed. As the table indicates, politicians were blamed in almost half of the articles (44.9 percent, n = 149). No Child Left Behind was the second most-blamed and was found in 37.3 percent of the articles (n = 124).

Table 7: Person or Group Responsible/Blamed

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Person or Group Responsible/Blamed	Teacher(s)	19	3.7%	5.7%
	School District Administrator(s)	30	5.8%	9.0%
	Parent(s)	2	0.4%	0.6%
	Politician(s)	149	28.8%	44.9%
	Student(s)	6	1.2%	1.8%
	Union Representative(s)	20	3.9%	6.0%
	Societal Factor(s)	38	7.4%	11.4%
	No Child Left Behind	124	24.0%	37.3%
	School(s)/Educational System	13	2.5%	3.9%
	Not Applicable	77	14.9%	23.2%
	Other	39	7.5%	11.7%
	Total	517	100.0%	155.7%

Finally, the variable of article type, news or editorial/op-ed, was coded for analysis. News made up 69.9 percent of the sample of articles (n = 232) and editorials/op-eds made up 30.1 percent of the articles (n = 100). Table 8 shows the frequencies of the published articles in the sample by newspaper.

Table 8: Article Type * Newspaper Crosstabulation

		Newspaper		
		<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Editorial/Op-Ed	Count	29	33	38
	% within Newspaper	22.1%	35.9%	34.9%
News	Count	102	59	71
	% within Newspaper	77.9%	64.1%	65.1%
Total	Count	131	92	109
	% within Newspaper	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results show that *The New York Times* published a higher frequency of news articles about education (77.9 percent, n = 102) while *The Wall Street Journal* (35.9 percent, n = 33) and *USA Today* (34.9 percent, n = 38) published a higher frequency of editorials/op-eds. These differences were tested by a chi-square analysis and were found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2, n = 332) = 6.576, p = .037$).

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study is to examine the newspaper coverage of No Child Left Behind to determine whether certain frames are used to describe public schools in the U.S. and if those frames characterize public education in a certain way. The study sought to answer two questions: Does the news coverage of public education characterize schools as in crisis? Do articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate the failing schools narrative in the news coverage of public education? To answer these questions, six hypotheses and a research question were proposed. Analysis of the results shows that some of the hypotheses are supported while others do not have significant evidence to be supported.

The first hypothesis explored the continuity of the framing theoretical approach in the context of news coverage about public education in the U.S. Framing has been researched extensively in other topics, such as crime, politics and healthcare, but few research studies exist about the framing of education despite the education system being arguably one of the country's most important institutions. The hypothesis proposed that the same generic frames identified in previous research on other topics would also be found in a majority of the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind. The results of the content analysis showed that all but one article in the sample included at least one of the four frames studied: attribution of responsibility/blame, conflict, context and sensationalism. Three of the four frames – context, attribution of responsibility/blame and conflict – each were found in more than half of the newspaper

articles. Sensationalism was found much less frequently in only 2.4 percent of the articles. Overall, Hypothesis 1 is supported, and it is supported for each of the frames individually except sensationalism.

This is a useful finding, as it both demonstrates evidence that newspaper coverage of public education follows the same framing conventions as other topics, which provides support for further research in this area, and it supports the growth of the framing theoretical perspective, providing further evidence to support the use of certain generic frames by the news media. This study sought to accomplish both of those things in line with recommendations from scholars, including Borah (2011), who determined that future framing research should connect with the broader understanding of framing to facilitate the development and growth of the theory. He, along with others, recommended adhering to a standardized model of framing and operationalizing frames in the context of previous studies. This finding also provides evidence that educators, politicians and other interested citizens who follow the news coverage of public education may come to expect certain types of frames to be apparent when reading articles about public schools. Based on the data, it is likely they would encounter a description of someone or some group receiving blame or of a situation being described as a conflict, for example.

The second hypothesis used prior research by Iyengar (1991), Tamir and Davidson (2011), Briggs (2012) and others as a guide to propose that episodic frames would be used more often than thematic frames in the news coverage of public education since No Child Left Behind. Episodic frames accounted for 78 percent of the news coverage in the sample, meaning Hypothesis 2 is also supported. This finding provides additional support for the development of the framing theoretical approach and follows

the expectation set by the first hypothesis that education news coverage is framed similarly to the way other topics have been framed in the past. This finding is important, because articles that are framed episodically tend to help reporters explain complex issues by discussing them through a localized or anecdotal lens, but episodic articles can also distract the audience from the larger issues that contribute to problems or lead to solutions (Iyengar, 1991). Additionally, the use of primarily episodic articles emphasizes issues as one-time events rather than ongoing issues (Rodgers & Thorson, 2001).

The third hypothesis derived from Iyengar's (1991) episodic and thematic frames research as well as Briggs' (2012) findings that blame attribution is more likely to be found in episodic frames than with thematic frames. The hypothesis proposed that the news articles about public education that were framed as episodes would include an attribution of responsibility/blame frame more frequently than articles that are thematic. The blame frame was found in a higher percentage of episodic articles as prior research has shown, but the difference was not significant enough in this study to draw a conclusion that would support the hypothesis, therefore Hypothesis 3 is not supported.

Based on Chyi, Lewis and Zheng's (2011) research on the news framing of crises, including potentially manufactured crises, the fourth hypothesis proposed that the news coverage of No Child Left Behind would frame public education as in a state of crisis by using conflict and sensationalism frames more than context frames, which would provide historical and factual support to articles. Conflict was found in more than half of the articles in the sample, showing that the news coverage of education is regularly characterized by the presentation of two or more sides in conflict over issues. Prior research on the conflict frame has shown that strong evidence of its presence in articles

can produce cynical reactions in audiences, so it is important for both journalists and readers to be aware of its frequent use (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Tamir & Davidson, 2011). Despite the frequency of conflict found in the articles, the frame was not used more often than context in the sample. Context was found in almost all of the articles, and sensationalism was only found in eight articles in the sample. This is good news for the journalism profession. The assumption of “good” journalism is grounded in objectivity, and reporters are to present the news with “facts, not emotions, assumptions or opinions” (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011, p. 3). Based on the literature, it was expected that the frequency of sensationalism would be much higher and the frequency of context would be much lower, however the data analysis showed that these results were reversed. Hypothesis 4 is not supported.

The fifth hypothesis predicted that a new frame, a failing public schools theme, would be identified in the news coverage of education since No Child Left Behind. The frame was constructed using words that were previously identified by scholars as occurring frequently in the news coverage of public education. This construction is aligned with Entman’s (1993) definition of frames, which states that they are made up of certain keywords and phrases that reinforce what is communicated in an article. Along with this definition, the hypothesis follows Cappella and Jamieson’s (1997) guidance that frames must be commonly observed in journalistic practice and recognizable by others. Additionally, Cohen’s (2010) research found that schools are positioned as the “objects of evaluation rather than as active agents” through the use of words and phrases such as “fail,” “miss the mark” and “have trouble” (p. 111). Syntax such as “schools...landed” implies that schools actively put themselves in a position of failure and ignores the role

other factors may have played. The language leads to the construction of an educational crisis in which schools are failing and institutional solutions are required (Cohen, 2010).

Therefore, the failing public schools theme is identified by the persistent use of certain words that give salience to the idea that public schools are failing and in crisis. Through the content analysis the words “failing,” “broken,” “ineffective,” “crisis” and “reform” were tallied, along with any other words or phrases with similar meaning that were found in the articles. One of these words and/or another word or phrase with the same meaning was included in 79.2 percent of the articles, and more than one word or phrase was used per article on average. The word “failing” was the most common word used and was found in more than half of the news articles. The use of this word has been institutionalized, in part, by No Child Left Behind, because the law identifies schools that do not achieve at a certain level on their annual performance measures as “failing” under the law (Farhi, 2012). However, the media’s use of this word, sometimes explaining the institutional definition of the term and sometimes using it as a keyword presumably understood by the audience, contributes to the social construction of the idea that the public education system is failing and in need of repair. The word “reform” was also used in slightly less than half of the articles in the sample. Among other words identified, “overhaul,” “low-performing,” and “troubled” were also found frequently. “Broken,” “crisis” and “ineffective” were found less frequently than expected, but many words that have the same meaning were identified. Since the words used to construct the failing public schools theme were found overall in a majority of the news coverage, Hypothesis 5 is supported.

This is an important finding, because it provides evidence of a new frame that could be prevalent in the news coverage of public education and could lead to future research to explore how this frame might affect audience's perceptions of public schools. When certain words or phrases are used repeatedly in the discussion of topics they can shape and influence the dialogue. Eventually, as the audience sees the same words used to describe public schools and certain descriptions become the prevailing narrative, the assumption that all public schools are failing or in need of drastic change may begin to take hold. Ideas that are given value or priority by the media can influence what people believe by promoting a selective view of reality if the audience interprets them the same way (McQuail, 2010). This is the process of salience through repetition that Entman (1993) described in his early discussions of framing and that could have a implications for audience effects.

The final hypothesis predicted that the news coverage of No Child Left Behind would present an overall impression or tone of pessimism about the status of public education in the U.S. While the data shows that a strong majority of the articles in the sample had a neutral tone, there were twice as many articles in the sample that were negative than there were articles that were positive and the variation was determined to be statistically significant favoring the negative articles. Hypothesis 6 is partially supported. The overall tone provided by the articles was more balanced than expected, but the negative news coverage still outweighed the positive to a significant enough degree that it could contribute to an impression of pessimism about public education.

The research question looked at several measures to determine if *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* frame education similarly or differently.

A prior study by Chyi, Lewis and Zheng (2011) using articles from the same three newspapers found that they framed the topic of the newspaper financial crisis similarly despite differences in focus or style. A comparison of the generic frames used in each of the newspapers, the frequency of episodic versus thematic articles and the differences in tone were all measured and some differences were identified, however none of the results were statistically significant. The answer to the research question is, no, there are no statistically significant differences in how the three newspapers frame education.

In addition to the hypotheses and research question, the research study also considered three more variables that are valuable to the overall understanding of how newspapers portray public schools in their articles. In the data on the types of sources used by reporters, a clear favorite emerged as politicians were referenced as sources in more than 60 percent of the articles. The next most frequent sources were independent research or report in about 35 percent of the articles and school reformer or interested citizen in about 34 percent of the articles. People who work in schools or school districts were much less likely to be used as sources. School district administrators were referenced as sources in less than a fourth of the articles, and teachers were only referenced in about 14 percent of the articles. Prior research has provided evidence to support this finding. Elites, such as top management, are frequently used as sources (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2011). Entman's (2007) content bias theory says that media distribute political power to particular groups and viewpoints based on who is favored or selected as a source in an article. Their ideas become the favored viewpoint while those who are not favored become weaker. Gerstl-Pepin's (2002) qualitative analysis of education news found that students, parents, teachers and other educators were excluded

from the dialogue about education and thus could not take part in defining the issues. Politicians mostly defined the educational issues presented in the news media. Without a variety of perspectives, the news on education cannot be presented objectively. Finally, Cohen (2010) found that teacher professional identity is most often formed by others who talk about teachers rather than by teachers talking about themselves, and this diminishes the perceived expertise and knowledge of the individuals who are closest to the daily educational activity in schools.

A review of the sources compared with the words identified for the failing public schools theme revealed that articles including politicians as a source provided the highest incidences of words like “failing,” “reform,” and “overhaul.” Unions and independent research and reports also contributed frequently to the usage of these words. Surprisingly, school administrators also contributed frequently to the use of some of these words, particularly “failing,” which could be explained by the likelihood that school administrators use the institutional language established by No Child Left Behind, since “failing” is an official description of schools that do not meet specific academic performance levels under the law.

Politicians were found to be the most frequent source in the news articles, but they were also found to be attributed responsibility or blamed more frequently than any other groups. Politicians were blamed in about half of the articles, and No Child Left Behind was blamed in 37 percent. This is an interesting finding, because educators have long reported that they feel the media focuses blame on teachers (Bradley, 1997; Dowman & Mills, 2008). In fact, teachers were only blamed in 19 articles in the sample (5.7 percent). School district administrators were blamed in 30 articles (9 percent).

Societal factors, which include socioeconomic status, homelessness, race, gender, nationality and other factors educators cannot control, were blamed more frequently at 11.4 percent.

Finally, a review of the number of articles that were either news or editorials/op-eds revealed that 70 percent were news and about 30 percent were editorials/op-eds. Extensive data analysis was not conducted in this area since it was not a part of the hypotheses, but statistically significant evidence was found for differences in the frequencies that *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* published either news or editorials about education. *The New York Times* produced more news articles, while *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* tended to produce editorials and op-eds at a higher frequency. This finding could have implications for future study to see if the overall number of editorials in the sample or the differences between the newspapers has any effect on the framing of public education since No Child Left Behind.

Limitations

This study is limited in scope in a couple of ways. First of all, this research focused on the news coverage of public education that was produced by three major U.S. newspapers only. It did not attempt to sample from all available newspaper coverage from regional and local newspapers across the country due to the anticipated volume of articles that would have been returned from such a search. A conscious decision was made to limit the sample of articles to the three newspapers with the largest national circulations: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. These

newspapers have been used frequently for content analyses in previous research, and their national reputation provides an opportunity for their coverage to reach the news wires, influence the news agenda of local newspapers across the country and even provide content for broadcast news and cable talk shows. If this research were conducted using local newspapers, the results could potentially be different, assuming a local newspaper would be more likely than national papers to report a community angle. Additionally, this research chose to focus its analysis on the news coverage provided by newspapers instead of studying broadcast news or online media. Data shows that online news coverage is becoming more extensive than broadcast and print coverage in major news outlets such as *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *MSNBC* (American Teacher, 2010). However, education receives a higher level of coverage in newspapers than in other types of media. As of 2012, education accounted for 4.5 percent of the newshole in newspapers but only 1.6 percent of the overall newshole including broadcast media (Edmonds, Guskin, Rosentiel & Mitchell, 2012). Also, this study sampled articles from 2001 through 2012. While online news coverage has become more prevalent in recent years, coverage may have been less comprehensive online in the early 2000s.

This study is also limited by the portion of the framing process that was examined. Scheufele (1999) described framing as a multi-step process that includes frame building, frame setting, individual-level effects and journalists as audiences. This study is limited to only studying the frame setting step in this process by looking at the frames found in the newspapers and how those frames shape the news coverage of public education. It does not test the effects the frames could have on the public, how those frames influence other journalists or what societal or professional factors lead to the

development of the frames to begin with. Content analysis alone cannot provide information about the effects of content on an audience (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011), and additional studies would be needed to study the complete framing process.

Implications

The findings of this research provide useful insight into the way public education is discussed in the United States. Journalists, school administrators and government officials should reference these results as well as other research on the news framing of public education to become more aware of the potentially negative language and themes that could influence the way the public perceives the success or failure of schools. Since public schools are funded by federal, state and local governments, citizens should have access to objective and comprehensive information about their performance through the news media, just as citizens should be informed in the news of the performance of their elected officials.

The results of this study suggest that journalists are framing public education as instances of passing or failing rather than in a broader perspective, which could hinder the public's ability to see that schools now have higher levels of accountability for all children and are performing better overall than they did 30 years ago. News articles include blame and conflict frequently, and are more likely to have a negative tone than a positive tone. The news coverage is also supporting the growth of a vocabulary that describes schools as broken and in need of overhaul. Journalists should examine the language, frames and sources they use to describe public schools in their articles and strive to provide balanced reporting on the issues.

School administrators and government officials should also examine the way they describe public schools in their own communication with reporters and the public. The results of this study show that they may be contributing to the prevailing narrative of failing schools by using certain words on a regular basis. Words such as “failing” are institutionalized by No Child Left Behind, and use without explanation of their meaning in the law, could lead the public to the assumption that all schools are failing, regardless of the complex challenges facing individual students and/or whole schools, such as poverty, limited English proficiency or low parent involvement. School administrators and politicians should partner with the news media to provide the public with access to reliable data and facts about the performance of schools so they can be evaluated objectively.

For scholars, this research demonstrates a need for continued study of the way public education is framed in the news coverage. Just as framing studies have been conducted on a variety of other topics in the news, education is a topic that should be evaluated completely in order to collect quantitative data that can inform journalists of how they are covering the topic and adjustments that can be made to improve the news product.

Future Research

The hypotheses and results of this study offer several suggestions for future research in the news framing of public education in the U.S. First of all, the existing quantitative framing research on the topic of public education is rather limited, and this study seeks to provide additional research in this area. Since society’s knowledge and

understanding about a phenomenon develops over time after extensive research, this study alone will not be sufficient in providing definitive information about the way the news media have framed public schools. Additional quantitative studies on news framing should be conducted on the topic of public education specifically.

Secondly, this study seeks to provide evidence to support what discourse analysis, interviews and observations have already found – that the prevailing narrative in news coverage of public education is that schools are failing and broken. Overall, several of the hypotheses about the framing of public education were supported, which provides the opportunity for future research in these areas. This content analysis only provided a starting point for further media effects research and for now cannot provide information about the effects of content on an audience (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). To make any conclusions about effects, a separate study would need to be conducted with audience members. Since certain generic frames, which have been researched extensively for other topics, were also found in the news coverage of public education through this study, future research could examine the effects these frames have on audience perceptions of public schools. From there, research could also look at how the frames affect other journalists and what professional or societal factors contribute to the building of the frames in order to provide a complete explanation of the framing process that forms the reality perceived by audiences and reporters as they read about and report on public education.

Finally, this research seeks to contribute knowledge to the overall framing theoretical approach. This study advanced the use of generic frames that were documented in previous framing literature in order to unite this study with the larger

scope of framing research that has been conducted. Scholars recommend the advancement of a systematic approach to selecting frames for research studies in order to add clarity and facilitate development and growth in the framing theoretical approach (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Borah, 2011). Additional framing research that is conceptualized and operationalized from the existing literature is needed on the topic of public education as well as a variety of other topics covered by the news media.

Conclusion

The research described in this paper was conducted to answer two questions proposed at the beginning of this study: Does the news coverage of public education characterize schools as in *crisis*? Do articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate the *failing schools* narrative in the news coverage of public education? These questions should be researched, because a gap has been observed between the way national academic data depicts the success of public school students and the prevailing narrative that public schools are *failing* and *in crisis*. Public opinion polls show the lowest public confidence in America's education system since data was first collected in the 1970s, yet national comparative testing data shows that overall students are performing at higher levels academically. It is important to understand how media frame the education system since the public gains knowledge about public schools through news coverage and the media has the ability to promote certain realities through the frames they use.

Until now, only a limited amount of research has been conducted in this area. Most of the studies are qualitative discourse analyses of education news coverage, but very little quantitative research exists on news framing of public education, specifically

during No Child Left Behind. This research was needed, because the lives of most Americans are impacted by public schools. Almost everyone has either attended a public school or is connected financially by paying taxes. This study adds additional quantitative information to the body of research on this important American institution.

The results of a content analysis of newspaper coverage since No Child Left Behind provided evidence to support four out of the six hypotheses proposed at the beginning of this study. The same generic frames identified in previous research on other topics are also used in the news coverage of public education. Like other topics, public education is framed more episodically than thematically. A failing public schools theme was identified in a majority of the news coverage, and the news coverage of No Child Left Behind, while mostly balanced, did exhibit a higher frequency of negative articles than positive, which could contribute to an overall impression or tone of pessimism about the status of public education in the U.S. *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* all frame public education similarly. Despite these findings, there is not enough evidence to support a higher level of attribution of responsibility or blame in episodic articles about public education, which is a departure from the results of previous research. There also is not evidence of conflict and sensationalism outweighing context in the news coverage of public education, which was contrary to what was expected but good news for the profession of journalism. More research in these areas may be needed to provide additional support for these findings, because at this point quantitative research on this topic has been limited. While these results are promising, more research is needed to solidify their ability to be generalized to the broader population of news articles about public education across the country.

In summary, the findings of this study do provide evidence that articles about No Child Left Behind perpetuate a failing schools narrative in the news coverage of public education. Additional research may be needed to determine more specifically whether the state of public education is being described by the news media as a crisis, but evidence certainly exists that the language used to discuss public schools focuses on the need for an overhaul of the system, which implies there is something broken that must be fixed.

APPENDIX A: CODE SHEET

- 1. CODER ID: _____
- 2. HEADLINE: _____
- 3. BYLINE: _____
- 4. YEAR PUBLISHED: _____
- 5. STORY LENGTH: _____

6. NEWSPAPER (*Choose one*):
- 1) *The New York Times* _____
 - 2) *USA Today* _____
 - 3) *The Wall Street Journal* _____

7. ARTICLE TYPE (*Choose one*):
- 1) News _____
 - 2) Editorial _____

Frames

Which of the following frames are used in the story? (*Please mark yes or no for each type of frame listed below to indicate whether it is included in the news article.*)

- 8. ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY/BLAME 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 9. CONFLICT 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 10. SENSATIONALISM 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 11. CONTEXT 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 12. Overall, is the article more EPISODIC or THEMATIC? (*Please choose one.*)
 - 1) Episodic _____
 - 2) Thematic _____

Themes

Does the article include any of the following words?

- 13. FAILING 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 14. BROKEN 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 15. INEFFECTIVE 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____
- 16. CRISIS 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____

17. REFORM 1) Yes ____ 2) No ____

18. Does the article include any words or phrases that are different than the ones listed above but that have the same meaning (examples: “in trouble,” “miss the mark” or “defeated”)?

1) Yes ____ 2) No ____

19. If yes, please list the words and/or phrases below:

20. Who in the article is identified as the PERSON/GROUP RESPONSIBLE (who is to blame)?

(Please choose all that are responsible/blamed.)

1) Teacher(s) ____

2) School District Administrator(s) ____

3) Parent(s) ____

4) Politician(s) ____

5) Student(s) ____

6) Union(s) ____

7) Societal Factors (poverty, homelessness, race, gender, nationality, etc.) ____

8) No Child Left Behind ____

9) Other ____

10) Not Applicable. No one/nothing was blamed. ____

21. Which of the following individuals or groups were used as SOURCES in the article?

(Please select all that apply.)

1) Teacher(s) ____

2) School District Administrator(s) ____

3) Parent(s) ____

4) Politician(s) ____

5) Student(s) ____

6) Union Representative(s) ____

7) Independent Research or Report ____

8) School Reformer or Interested Citizen (not a politician or school employee) ____

9) Other ____

10) Not Applicable. No sources were used in the article. ____

22. What is the overall impression the article gives of the status of public education in the U.S.?

1) Positive ____

2) Neutral ____

3) Negative ____

APPENDIX B: CODE BOOK

1. **Coder ID:** Write the coder identification number (1, 2, etc.) as assigned by the researcher.
2. **Headline:** Write the full headline/title provided for the article. The headline is the main subject line at the top of the article that summarizes what the story is about. Sometimes the headline is bolded or the type is larger than the main article body text.
3. **Byline:** Write the name of the reporter who is named as the author of the article. The author is sometimes labeled next to the words “by” or “byline.” Sometimes the author is listed generically, such as “Staff Reports” or “Wire Reports.” Please use the same label used by the article. If no author is labeled, write “Unknown.”
4. **Year Published:** Write the year the story was published as listed on the article.
5. **Story Length:** Write the number of words in the article as listed on the article.
6. **Newspaper:** Mark one of the three options to indicate where the article was published: *The New York Times*, *USA Today* or *The Wall Street Journal*.
7. **Article Type:** Mark one of the two options to indicate if the article was from the news section or the editorial/op-ed section of the newspaper. Articles that should be marked as editorial will be identified as either an editorial or op-ed either next to the article headline or in the space where the newspaper section and page are listed. Some op-eds will also be designated as such with a sentence at the end of the article explaining the background of the article’s author.

Frames

Look for the types of frames used in the story. A frame is words, phrases or themes included in the article that help give meaning to it. Mark “yes” or “no” for each of the frames in the following questions to designate whether they are present or not.

8. **Attribution of Responsibility/Blame:** The story assigns responsibility or blames a certain person, cause, group or institution either through the main text of the story or in a quotation. An example of attribution of responsibility/blame in a news story about education might be a description in the story of how low test scores were the result of poor teacher quality, meaning teachers were to blame for the scores. Attribution of responsibility/blame should be identified by the text of the story, either in story facts or quotations.
9. **Conflict:** The story includes evidence of a disagreement between two or more individuals, groups or organizations. An example of conflict in a story about education

might be a teacher's union disagreeing with a governor about a new merit-based pay scale for teachers or a board of education in disagreement with school district staff members about how to administer a new technology program. Conflict should be identified in stories by the text naming two or more groups and describing a disagreement between them.

10. **Sensationalism:** The story uses dramatic or emotional words or imagery that are shocking or exaggerated and are more opinion-based than objective. An example of sensationalism in a news story about education could be the use of the words "students bombed the test" instead of the more factual "students received failing scores on the test." Sensationalism should be identified in the stories by the text containing descriptions that use exclamatory or emotional words rather than straightforward, factual words.

11. **Context:** The story provides data, historical information, definitions or explanations of solutions that help give understanding to the topic being discussed. An example of context in a news story about education could be a comparison of current test scores to test scores over a span of 30 years, definitions for the terms "failing" or "low-performing," or an explanation of how afterschool programs correlate with higher homework completion rates. Context will be identified in the stories as any time a factual piece of information, data point, definition or solution is included in the text of the article.

12. **Episodic vs. Thematic:** Choose whether the article is more episodic or thematic. Episodic stories depict issues as individual or event-specific instances not connected to a broader context. These stories may focus on a one-time event or on one group or person rather than a succession of events or society as a whole. An example of an episodic news story about education might be a story that reports test scores for a school district and attributes the low scores to poor teacher quality in the district without exploring other possible causes, such as high poverty or a new type of test question. Stories will be identified as episodic if the story topic covered is a one-time event, if the story's content uses a person as a human interest or emotional hook and the story's content assigns responsibility to a specific person, group or cause.

Thematic stories give the broader context of issues. They speak of larger bodies, such as whole institutions, countries or groups of people to explain a larger issue instead of using single events or people. These stories usually have less of a personal focus. They cover ongoing issues and may offer solutions. An example of a thematic news story about education could be a story reporting on the relationship between levels of childhood homelessness and statewide test scores, including an explanation of other economic and diversity factors that change over time. Stories will be identified as thematic if the story topic covered is an ongoing issue or series of events, the story's content speaks of institutions or groups holistically and causes or solutions are offered to provide a broader context to the story.

Themes

Look for the following words in the article and mark "yes" or "no" to designate whether they are included in any part of the article's text:

- 13. **Failing**
- 14. **Broken**
- 15. **Ineffective**
- 16. **Crisis**
- 17. **Reform**

18. Does the article include any words or phrases that are different than the ones listed above but that have the same general meaning (examples: “in trouble,” “miss the mark” or “defeated”)? Mark “yes” if any additional words or phrases with the same meaning can be found in the article, and “no” if no other words or phrases with the same meaning can be found.

19. If “yes” was marked in question 17, write in the word(s) and/or phrase(s) used in the story that have the same general meaning as “failing,” “broken,” “ineffective,” “crisis,” or “reform.” If “no” was marked in question 17, leave the question blank.

20. **Person/Group Responsible (who is to blame):** Please mark all of the people or groups that are mentioned in the article as being responsible or to blame for an issue. If “yes” was marked in question 7 that an attribution of responsibility/blame frame was found in the article, then the person/people or group that is blamed should be selected. More than one person and/or group may be selected, so please select all that apply. If the individual or group is not listed, mark “Other.” If “no” was marked in question 7 and no attribution of responsibility/blame frame was used in the article, mark “Not applicable. No one/nothing was blamed.”

21. **Sources:** Please mark all of the sources that are listed in the article. More than one source can be selected, so please select all that apply. Sources are the people or organizations selected to provide facts and commentary in a news story. Sources may be identified through quotations or through attribution for a piece of information or indirect quote. Look for evidence of the article attributing credit to a person or organization for specific facts and mark those in the list provided. If the individual or group is not listed, mark “Other.” If none are used in the article, mark “Not applicable. No sources were used in the article.”

22. **Overall impression of education:** Choose whether the article portrays public education as positive, negative or neutral. This should be determined by the overall tone and impression the article would give to the average reader. Please mark only one answer choice.

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