Cognitive Media Analysis of Disparities in the Education System

An Education Core Story Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Many argue that the education system is a primary mechanism by which social inequalities are reproduced and institutionalized in the United States.[1] Over the last century, scholars have devoted considerable attention to documenting educational disparities by race, ethnicity, class and gender, and to identifying the factors that cause, maintain and remediate these disparities. Research has shown that the public's understanding of educational disparities differs dramatically from that of experts and practitioners.[2] Media frames have a powerful effect in shaping public thinking by activating existing understandings or building new ones.[3] To the extent that it propagates unproductive or shallow understandings of educational disparities, the media are a potential source of the gap between expert and public thinking. However, precisely because of their impact on public thinking, media also represent a strategic lever to bridge gaps between expert and public understandings and, in so doing, widen public thinking about educational disparities.

This research is part of a series of reports that examines media coverage of education and learning issues.[4] The compendium of media reports is designed to inform experts and advocates about the patterned ways in which the media commonly represent education issues and how these patterns interact with public understanding. In order to do this, FrameWorks researchers first map the common streams of opinions, arguments and narratives that constitute "public discourses" about learning and education. FrameWorks then analyzes how the media coverage compares to messages education experts and advocates are trying to disseminate. Finally, researchers compare the dominant frames in the media to the cultural models — or shared, patterned and implicit understandings and assumptions — that Americans use to think about issues related to learning and education.[5] This comparison demonstrates *how* patterns in media coverage are likely to interact with, and potentially influence, public understanding.

In this report, FrameWorks researchers map the contours of media coverage of educational disparities by examining a sample of 183 media stories that covered these issues. This sample was drawn from print and broadcast media sources between October 1, 2010, and October 1, 2011. The findings presented here are based on an in-depth qualitative and cognitive analysis of these stories. By analyzing the ways that the media constrain and enable public understanding of specific issues, this report provides a blueprint for responding to, and informing, the media coverage of issues related to educational disparities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The analysis revealed the following themes in media stories about educational disparities.

- **Definition: Disparities are about competition for scarce resources.** The *Competition* frame and the related *Consumerist* frame permeate and structure the ways in which disparities are defined in the popular media. Together, these frames were present in thirty-six percent of the coverage and portray the education system as a collection of individuals competing with one another for finite education resources. When gaps between individual students emerge, the only source of remediation is to take resources from one group to assist the other. The idea of education as a zero-sum competition is applied primarily to racial and, to a lesser extent, socioeconomic groups. In contrast, other educationally disadvantaged groups, such as students with disabilities, are represented through the use of frames that do not evoke a zero-sum understanding of education resources.

- **Cause: Disparities are the natural result of individual difference.** A minority of stories describe the systemic factors that contribute to educational disparities (7 percent). These stories are far outnumbered by those that either include *no* discussion of the causal mechanisms that produce educational disparities, or imply that disparities result from individual differences in motivation and ability on the part of students, teachers or parents (64 percent and 29 percent). In the media, individual differences are frequently linked to "cultural" differences — structured by race and income — in the extent to which parents value educational achievement.

- **Solution: Even if disparities are a collective concern, government intervention is an ineffective solution.** Media coverage of educational disparities represents the government as a fractured system in which policymakers and stakeholders fight among themselves without regard for the well-being of students. As a result, the public education system, and government more generally, is portrayed as incapable of addressing and remediating educational inequalities. However, a subset of media coverage provides a powerful argument for finding ways to address disparities — namely, that high levels of inequality threaten the functioning of the entire education system and negatively affect all stakeholders. This type of coverage represents a potentially productive opening that education reformers can fit messages into and use to expand the public discourse.

Based on these results, patterns of media coverage strengthen individualistic models of the causes of educational disparities, and further entrench concomitant stereotypes

about deficits in the motivation and drive of students of color and low-income students. At the same time, the media's portrayal of government and the public education system as inefficient solidifies public pessimism about remediating educational inequalities. However, this analysis also shows that there are opportunities within existing media for advocates and experts to shift public discourse and understanding on this issue. A particularly promising strategy is to expand the extant, but recessive, media discourse about the systemic causes and collective consequences of educational inequities. Making this a more robust part of the media discourse on education can help broaden public understanding of what causes educational disparities and how best to address them.

RESULTS

Media coverage about educational disparities contains several key narrative elements. These elements include definitional, causal and solution-oriented frames. That is, media coverage contains explicit and implicit understandings of the *definition* of educational disparities, the *causes* of disparities, and the *solutions* or *rationales* for solution-oriented actions intended to address educational disparities. These three narrative elements, and their associated frames, are described in detail in the following sections.

1. Definitional Frames

1A. The "Competition" Frame
In describing educational disparities — whether those disparities are between black and white students, low-income and high-income students, or U.S. students and their international counterparts — the media frames educational outcomes as a competition with clear winners and losers. In the sample analyzed here, this frame was reinforced through language that described the benefits of education ("to get ahead," "to come out on top") or the lack of education opportunities (students are "falling behind"). The *Competition* and *Consumerist* frame described below were the most common in the sample (present in 36 percent of the sample).

The *Competition* frame was most visible in media coverage of reforms related to school choice. In these stories, journalists emphasized competition at two levels: between schools, and between students. Traditional public schools were portrayed as competing with various non-traditional alternatives (such as voucher programs for private schools or charter schools) to attract the best students. At the same time, they described how students and their families must compete for spots in the "best" schools.

> *Long before the Bloomberg administration, districts offered school choice. But in recent years the process has intensified. The reform movement has created an educational marketplace that presses schools to compete for students. This is good for the students selected for the strongest schools but not so good for children left behind and grouped as the weakest.[6]*

The *Competition* frame further implies that education "gaps" can only be closed at the expense of the education quality of another student or groups of students, as the following excerpts demonstrate.

> *Frederick M. Hess's long essay in the latest issue of the quarterly National Affairs pleased those of us who share the American Enterprise Institute scholar's dislike for politicians' fixation on closing the achievement gap. Reducing the gap sounds good until you realize that means it is okay for high achievers to stagnate so that low achievers can catch up.*
>
> *I have been venting about this for several years and getting only puzzled looks. Hess's piece — the most detailed and vehement ever on the subject — will hopefully lead to more discussion of better ways to deal with the different average achievement levels of poor kids and affluent kids.[7]*

The use of the achievement "gap" metaphor in the context of the *Competition* frame is particularly unproductive. It implies that the distribution of education resources is a literal race, in which some groups must suffer at the expense of others in order to "close" the achievement gap. When framed as such, policies to address educational disparities are drained of any collective benefit and, instead, become threatening proposals that allow some students to get ahead by forcing others to fall behind.

1B. The "Consumerist" Frame

The language of competition reinforces a second frame that FrameWorks has elsewhere termed the *Consumerist* frame — or the idea that the education system is a marketplace where actors buy and sell access, and one should get no less or more than what one pays for. In media stories in this sample, the *Consumerist* frame was evident in journalists' portrayals of education as a scarce and finite resource.

> *"She has a right to her viewpoint. I'm certainly not against white enrollment growing in DCPS," said Thomas Byrd, a member of the board of the Ward 8 council and former head of the PTA at Ballou High School. "But I'm just saying there's a perception out there that whites get what they want."[8]*
>
> *TOM MURPHY, CONNECTICUT DEPT. OF EDUCATION: The purpose of the magnet schools is to provide an integrated setting that brings suburban students into Hartford classrooms. The state is, in fact, building the building*

for free and providing state dollars to subsidize the operation of these schools in order to meet the state Supreme Court mandate of free and public education in a diverse setting.

O'BRIEN: Ninety-six percent of school kids in Hartford are a minority, in a community where people are desperate for good education. But Principal Perry says, in reality, the diversity mandate just takes away slots in a successful school from those who need it the most.[9]

1C. The "Different Disparities" Frame

Previous FrameWorks research has shown that public conversations about disparities are frequently either implicitly or explicitly about racial difference.[10] In this sample, media stories reported on disparities between groups defined by a number of different dimensions, including race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, immigrant status, and disability status. However, the presence of racial cues — whether implicit or explicit — was a central feature in how journalists discussed educational disparities.

Explicit racial cues are those that directly reference race. These cues tend to overtly represent racial stereotypes and, by doing so, trigger the perceived threats posed by people of color.[11] Consistent with previous research, educational disparities were most frequently discussed in terms of explicit differences in educational outcomes between black and white students. As evidence of racial disparities in education, the media pointed to measures that demonstrate differences in individual achievement, such as test scores and graduation rates, as well as institution-level measures such as adequate yearly progress, teacher training, and the strength and rigor of curriculums between school districts.

> *Additionally, Ravitch cites a recent report by the Educational Testing Service that "the black-white achievement gap is as old as the nation itself" but was cut in half in the 1970's and 1980's by, among other things, "increased economic opportunities for black families, federal investment in early education, and reductions in class size." Since then, the black-white achievement gap has once again widened.[12]*

Implicit, or indirect, references to race were evident in the ways in which journalists expressed the relationship between race and socioeconomic factors. Journalists both conflated race and class — implying that poor students and students of color are one and the same — and described them in additive terms, thus implying that being both non-white and poor constitutes a bigger educational disadvantage than being one or the other. Class indicators also served as a coded way for commentators to talk about racial inequality without directly mentioning race. The following examples illustrate how journalists attempted to tease out the relationship between race and class.

A 21st century version of the "White Man's Burden" has inspired the arc of these "reforms." It won't content itself with simply educating kids to have meaningful productive lives. Instead they are intent on creating a new elite out of the lower classes.[13]

For years there have been questions about whether this division of funding led to "unequal access" to education for the city's poor and mostly minority students. About 85% of students in the city are African-American, and about 87% are considered "low-income," according to court records. By contrast, many schools in the mostly suburban county have a majority of white, middle-class students. The county had resisted the merger and had filed a federal lawsuit, worried about the added responsibility of funding the city schools in a weak economy.[14]

No one disputes that some white students faced educational challenges during the resistance era. Although the state created a voucher program to help white children attend private schools, tuition was not always wholly subsidized, leaving poor whites with few options. But historians note that massive resistance hurt black students most. "To say that white students are as entitled to compensation, that speaks to the politics of the state, not the call for justice," said Clarence E. Walker, a professor at the University of California-Davis who has studied reparations.[15]

Implicit references to race and difference were also evident in coverage of disparities in educational achievement among immigrant groups. As exemplified in the excerpt below, these conversations covered funding issues for "illegal immigrants."

Out of 125 applicants, Cadenas was one of seven accepted into a Ph.D. program in psychology. But paying for the program was even more challenging for Cadenas than a typical student. Because Cadenas, 24, a native of Venezuela, is an illegal immigrant, he must pay out-of-state tuition, which is twice as expensive as in-state rates. The same 5-year-old Arizona law that imposed out-of-state tuition rates also bars undocumented students from receiving any taxpayer-funded financial aid.[16]

Regardless of whether references to race were implicit or explicit, coverage of disparities was framed as gaps in individual achievement resulting from competition for scarce education resources. These stories portrayed education as a "race to the top," with teams composed of competing racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups. The coverage regarding educational outcomes and opportunities for students with disabilities, which included neither implicit nor explicit racial cues, was very different. Journalists who covered student disability issues emphasized the similarities between disabled and non-disabled students, rather than difference.

"These children can access and enjoy everything a typically developing child would enjoy — they just have to access it differently," says Gina Shulman, a social worker at Lehmann. "We have that fine motor skill; we can take a finger and press all those tiny keyboard buttons and little tiny switches. Now, our children, with just a gentle touch, can color; they can play instruments."[17]

"I think we have a profound impact on a percentage of kids who, if there wasn't a program like ours, might be children that would end up in a special-education label for their whole academic careers, and because of the support they get here, end up really as part of the mainstream," Ms. Lawton said.[18]

Compared to the media's coverage of racial or socioeconomic disparities, which largely concentrated on students' experiences within the education system, media stories about disparities by disability status devoted greater attention to the kinds of resources that are required to help students with disabilities succeed in the education system and beyond.

District officials said programs such as SEARCH, which is in its second year, will become increasingly important to the school system's 2,700 special education students, half of whom are 16 or older. As they "age out" of the system at 22, they'll need skills to sustain them in the workplace. Richard Nyankori, the District's outgoing deputy chancellor for special education, said the transition from school to work "must be a poverty-breaking activity" for students. "If it's not, we're not doing this transition well," Nyankori said. "Most of our kids with disabilities live in poverty. They are almost destined to a life of poverty if we don't do something about it."[19]

Almost all learning, and especially school learning, involves a mix of explicit and implicit cognitive processes. Helping individuals with an autism spectrum disorder access their implicitly learned material while minimizing focusing on their explicit knowledge may aid real-life learning in those with an autism spectrum condition. As we noted in our paper, a potential source of difficulty for those with autism is their over-reliance on explicit strategies. As Nemeth and his colleagues note, "Using these results, therapists can design more effective educational and rehabilitation programs. Our findings suggest that learning mechanisms associated with frontal-striatal-cerebellar anatomy are partly intact in ASD."[20]

The media's coverage of disparities by disability status demonstrates that there exists a model in the public discourse that attends to difference and disparity without necessarily relying on a consumerist, winner-takes-all approach to remediating educational inequality. Unlike discussions of racial or class disparities, which drew heavily on the assumption that expanding educational opportunities for some groups requires limiting educational opportunities for others, there was no significant use of the *Competition* frame in media coverage of disparities that result from mental or physical disabilities. That is, providing opportunities for students with disabilities was not portrayed as a zero-sum proposal.

These differences in reporting may be the result of how journalists and the public at large understand the cause of disability versus racial disparities. While students without disabilities may be viewed as self-making individuals regardless of any social factors potentially impeding educational outcomes, those with disabilities are perhaps understood as more deserving recipients of educational interventions. In fact, previous FrameWorks research on race has shown that Americans, and particularly white Americans, believe that laws prohibiting racial discrimination have effectively "leveled the playing field." Thus, according to this logic, racial disparities result from failures of motivation and self-determination on the part of black and other communities of color.[21]

2. Causal Frames

There were three primary modes by which journalists dealt with the factors that *cause* educational disparities. They either provided no causal explanation (64 percent); relied on individualist explanations (29 percent); or, less frequently, pointed to institutional factors that perpetuate systemic inequalities (seven percent). Each of these explanatory modes is detailed below.

2A. The "Invisible Cause" Frame

While media stories in this sample clearly communicated to readers the existence of educational disparities, they typically failed to directly address why such disparities exist and persist. Instead, many journalists simply reported data on disparities without providing any analysis of the factors that contribute to differences in educational outcomes among groups.

> When results from the Program for International Student Assessment showed that U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 17th among the 65 countries participating in the literacy test, reformers were calling it a "a Sputnik moment," as if the country were on the road to collapse. Little mention was made of the fact that when the results were broken down by ethnicity, Asian American students came in second in the world and white American

students came in sixth. Unfortunately, the very low scores earned by Latinos (41st) and African Americans (46th) dragged the U.S. average down.[22]

This kind of reporting implicitly normalizes disparities. It suggests that, however undesirable they may be, inequalities among students are expected in the American education system. The normalization of disparities is further substantiated through the use of the *Competition* frame described above. According to this article, the U.S. is losing a competitive edge with the rest of the world because of the low test scores of students of color. Repeated exposure to this conflation of global competition with the achievement gap may explain why the global *Competition* frame fails to evoke more progressive education reforms.[23]

2B. The "Individual Cause" Frame

Those media stories that explored the causes of educational disparities most frequently relied on individualistic explanations: Parents are not sufficiently involved, students are not motivated, and teachers in certain school districts are underprepared, overwhelmed, or simply do not care. The following examples illustrate how the media represent disparities as the result of individual characteristics or motivation.

We know that the problem starts early with two-thirds of American fourth graders who cannot read at their grade level and continues on their way to high school with 1.2 million students dropping out each year. Disadvantaged children come to school at least two years behind their peers in pre-reading skills.[24]

The above excerpts both argue that reducing educational inequalities requires a greater investment of resources. Whether intentional or not, however, these stories also frame the cause of educational disparities as individual students' motivation in school or their level of intelligence. They foreground characteristics of individual students, while relegating the larger systemic factors that may produce and perpetuate educational inequalities to the background.

2C. The "Institutional Cause" Frame

Although less common than references to invisible or individual causes, there was some discussion of the institutional factors that impact educational achievement — including school quality, course offerings, and opportunities for teachers' professional development. These articles focused on the lack of learning opportunities available to students in low-income and/or communities of color, and, in doing so, connected learning outcomes to factors beyond individual characteristics of students, parents and teachers.

> *"Some people wind up in better schools than others, and it continues to break down by race and class," Joseph P. Viteritti, a professor of public policy at Hunter College, noted. "And the learning gap between minorities and whites is there, and it's like that in every city across the country."[25]*

> *We believe you cannot ignore poverty. We just believe right now the reason we have this problem is we're sending kids who face all these extra challenges into the same setup — not even, because the kids in the more resourced communities have stronger schools, so we're sending them into a lesser version of the same setup that we send kids with many more privileges into, and that is why we have the achievement gap.[26]*

These kinds of articles shift the definition, causes and solutions regarding educational disparities from the individual to the systemic level. That is, they suggest that disparities are not about individual students' academic achievement, but about real differences in the learning opportunities and education experiences provided to those students. These stories define those opportunities not solely in terms of teacher characteristics such as "willingness to care," but with respect to the systemic provision of resources (or lack thereof). Disparities are not about gaps in achievement, according to these stories, but about differences in institutional quality and the experiences, environments and contexts that support learning.

3. Solution Frames

3A. The "Dysfunctional Government" Frame

Previous FrameWorks research has shown that the American public typically assigns responsibility for educational outcomes to parents, teachers and students.[27] Media coverage of educational disparities adds government officials to this triad. Government, particularly at the federal level, was presented as ineffective, wasteful and incompetent in 24 percent of the stories that contained an explicit solutions statement. This is consistent with past FrameWorks research on how Americans think of government more generally.[28] The dominant message of the stories in this sample was that government is ill-equipped to provide solutions to education problems.

Media stories portrayed the primary source of this dysfunction as the lack of coordination among municipal, state and federal levels of government. Instead of working together, government actors were described as engaged in near-constant opposition — both with each other and with other actors across the education system.

> *But Margaret Spellings, education secretary under President George W. Bush, said she worries about backsliding. "I'm skeptical about states' ability or will to do great reform or close the achievement gap," she said. "The reason this whole waiver issue is before us is [the states] told us they were*

going to do something and didn't do it. And now they want a waiver against their own promises." "We need more accountability, not less," Spellings added. "Implicit in this situation is the idea that it's unreasonable to expect children to perform on grade level and we need to find a way to let the adults get out of that."[29]

The investigation was part of a probe by the U.S. Department of Education into whether 76 public school districts nationwide comply with civil rights law. Among the findings, the department concluded that the Los Angeles Unified School District was classifying students as proficient in English though they couldn't speak the language, federal officials told The Wall Street Journal. "Those students had been languishing in limbo," said Russlynn Ali, the U.S. Department of Education assistant secretary for civil rights. The investigation also found that black students have limited access to technology and library resources. In addition, black students "were subject to unfair discipline," Ms. Ali said, and had higher suspension and expulsion rates than other students.[30]

Instead of identifying government policies as a potential means to ensure equal education opportunities for all students, journalists and commentators highlight the incompetence and inefficiencies of government and school administrators in remedying educational disparities. This coverage implies that government actors fail at their jobs, work against the interests of ordinary citizens, and — in some cases — may even be the cause of educational disparities. Because the logical conclusion is that the education system would benefit from less government involvement, these stories leave a large hole in the public discourse regarding the mechanisms by which systemic educational inequities might be addressed.

3B. The "Systemic Dysfunction" Frame

Although less frequent than the dysfunctional government frame described above (4 percent of the stories that contained an explicit solutions statement), some stories in this sample provided examples of alternative ways to think about how educational inequalities should be addressed. These stories argued that population-level differences in educational outcomes reflect systemic inequalities that extend far beyond the classroom. These stories explained, or at least implied, that educational inequalities reflect a social system that is failing to provide all children with access to the conditions and environments necessary to support educational success.

"In the No Child Left Behind lexicon, 'no excuses' became the battle cry to promote high expectations and heightened achievement for our poorest students," said former Cobb teacher Rebecca Sayler. "However, when we use the mantra 'no excuses,' we mask the realities that poor children deal with," Sayler said. "'No excuses' becomes our excuse as a society to continue

neglecting the neglected. We don't want to solve the problems of childhood hunger, unstable homes or transience. We don't really want to look at why children in poverty have such different education outcomes than children of affluence."[31]

By describing the education system as one in a set of interconnected structures, systems and policies that influence children's abilities to learn, the Systemic Dysfunction frame may serve as a potential antidote to the Competition and Consumerism frames, and the deeper meta-frame of Individualism in which these notions reside. The Systemic Dysfunction frame implies that the education system does not function optimally when some students have limited access to educational resources and opportunities. In so doing, it portrays education not as a scarce resource for which groups must compete, but instead suggests that resources to support learning must reach all communities in order for the education system to serve all students.

COGNITIVE IMPLICATIONS

Based on FrameWorks' analysis of dominant and recessive cultural models that people use to think about disparities,[32] we conclude that exposure to the media frames described above is likely to have the following effects by activating particular, familiar ways of thinking about educational disparities.

- **The *Individual Cause* frame supports the unproductive public view that educational disparities are the inevitable result of individual differences**. In previous research, FrameWorks has shown that the public uses an *Every Child is Different* model to reason that differences in educational outcomes are simply "the way things are."[33] This model obscures the role of non-individual–level factors that influence educational outcomes — such as health care, safe housing and quality learning environments — and makes consideration of structural and systemic interventions particularly difficult.[34] In this sense, both the *Every Child is Different* model and the *Individual Cause* frame jointly support the fatalistic view that public policies can do little to reduce educational disparities.

- **Media frames of *Ineffective Government* depress support for policy-level interventions and buttress fatalistic views about the impossibility of meaningful education reform.** FrameWorks research has shown that the public holds somewhat contradictory thinking about the role of government in remediating educational inequality. On the one hand, Americans believe that the government legislation emerging from the civil rights movement has been largely effective in ending systemic discrimination against people of color in all

domains of public life, including education. At the same time, the public views government as inefficient, wasteful and incapable of enacting meaningful change — especially in the domain of education reform. By portraying government as wholly incapable of remediating educational inequities and by framing disparities in educational outcomes as being about individual rather than systemic characteristics, the media coverage is likely to further reinforce these understandings.

- **The *Systemic Dysfunction* frame holds some promise.** For the public, the impacts of disparities are largely conceived of in individual terms. Disparities in educational outcomes are problematic only to the extent that they dampen the career and economic prospects of certain individuals and their families. There is little understanding of how inequality in educational outcomes has collective impacts, such as weakening the national economy and or civic life more broadly. These dominant patterns of public thinking currently crowd out more recessive models that speak to the importance of equal access to educational opportunities. Although also recessive, the media's Systemic Dysfunction frame may prove useful in broadening public discourse by providing a collective rationale for education reform. If this media frame were to be expanded into a more dominant discourse, it stands to add an important piece to the public's understanding of educational disparities.

Absences

In addition to existing features of the media discourse that are likely to have cognitive implications for the American public, there are also several key absences in this coverage that are likely to affect public understanding.

- **Thin coverage of the interaction of race and class leaves room for the public to fall back on dominant notions of race and "culture."** FrameWorks research has shown that the public has a very limited understanding of the interaction of race and class, especially as this interaction impacts educational outcomes.[35] White children are typically imagined to live in wealthy suburbs with excellent schools and with parents who "value" and "prioritize" education, while black children's experiences are equated with poverty, failing inner-city schools, and parents who do not "care" about education. Educational outcomes are relegated to "cultural differences" characterized by dramatic differences in the extent to which parents value and support their children's educational careers. The public's definition of culture implies that these differences are intractable, and this obscures the potential of public policies to remediate educational inequalities among socioeconomic as well as racial and ethnic groups. Media coverage of the intersection of race and class in the education system (and in American society more generally) is similarly lacking in nuance,

and leaves an opening for these stereotypical notions of "culture" to be invoked, thereby strengthening these patterns of reasoning. The thin understanding of the intersection of race and class in both media coverage and in public thinking presents a substantial communication challenge. FrameWorks is currently developing a metaphor that will aid communicators in talking about how race and class background are translated into disparities in educational outcomes.

- **Lack of attention to causal mechanisms that underlie educational disparities is a wasted opportunity to expand public thinking.** Media coverage rarely attends to the causal mechanisms and processes that underlie educational disparities. Instead, differences in achievement are presented primarily as data points and divorced from the contexts, environments and experiences from which they emerge. FrameWorks research has shown that the American public also lacks a sense of the causal mechanisms that produce educational disparities; that is, they are unable to trace the systemic and contextual processes by which *disadvantage* is translated into educational *disparity*.[36] Instead, in an instantiation of what FrameWorks has elsewhere called the *Family Bubble* model, the public emphasizes the role and socioeconomic status of parents (i.e., wealthy parents have more time to devote to their children's educational endeavors while poor parents cannot provide such guidance) in explaining why some children have poorer educational outcomes than others.[37] The media's thin treatment of the causal mechanisms that underlie educational disparities reinforces this individual-level perspective. When this causal slot is left unfilled, the public will fall back on unproductive understandings of educational disparities as being the result of deficits in the motivation and self-makingness of individual parents and children. This dampens appreciation for the role of policy-level solutions. Introducing media discussions that focus on the causal processes associated with educational disparities can expand these narrow patterns of public understanding. This is a challenging communications task, however, and one that will require additional research to identify the best ways to frame *how* differences in context and conditions become educational disparities.

CONCLUSION

Discussion of differences in educational outcomes across various groups permeates media coverage of education. However, little attention is paid to *why* these differences exist or to the complex pathways by which disadvantage becomes disparity. These patterns are paralleled in the public's thinking on educational disparities.[38] It is therefore critical that education advocates identify opportunities to expand media explanations of *how* structural and systemic disadvantages impact student learning and achievement. FrameWorks is currently developing an explanatory metaphor that will assist education reformers in effectively communicating these causal mechanisms and processes.

The media present other challenges to education advocates. First, this analysis shows that when the value of self-makingness is strongly applied to the disadvantaged group — as is the case when groups are divided along racial or ethnic lines — individualized causes of, and solutions to, educational disparities follow. The dearth of causal stories about systemic and structural racial inequality fails to trump ideas of self-makingness. Second, the inclusion of government appears to provide the opportunity for communicators to present a broader view of the actors that comprise the education system. However, the media's representation of government as corrupt, inept and inefficient only adds another challenge to this discourse and narrows public thinking about education reform rather than expanding it.

Despite the problems identified in the coverage, there were promising media treatments of educational disparities. The coverage of disparities for disabled children fundamentally avoided the zero-sum discussions that characterized coverage of race and class disparities. This is not a recommendation for communicators to talk about race and class in terms of a disability, but rather, to highlight a model of addressing disparities that does not rely on *Consumerist* and *Competition* frames. Finally, journalists, at times, were able to explain systemic causes of educational disparities and to also identify our collective interest in reducing inequality in the education system. This also is an important window for advocates who want to include these more systemic discussions in the popular discourse.

APPENDIX: METHODS

This research is guided by two primary goals: (1) to examine how topics related to disparities are regularly treated in the media, and (2) to explore the likely impact of these patterns on the public's thinking on inequality in education. In order to address these goals, the analysis is divided into two stages: (1) a content analysis based on a qualitative and quantitative examination of media materials that reference disparities, and (2) a cognitive analysis of the media frames identified in relation to findings from previous cultural models research. Descriptions of the data and analytical techniques are provided below.

Media Content Analysis

A recent Pew Center study suggests that, by and large, Americans receive their daily news from a combination of newspapers (both print and online) and broadcast news sources.[39] Sample selection in the current study was based on this assumption and included materials taken from national newspaper articles and television broadcasts, as well as three news blogs representing a span of political perspectives. Using the LexisNexis, Factiva and Google News databases, specific news sources were selected based on circulation/viewership statistics and geographical and political diversity. The sample was drawn from the following print sources: *The Washington Post, USA Today, San Jose Mercury News, New York Post, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Houston Chronicle, The Denver Post, Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Sources used to construct the sample also included national television newscasts from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, CNN and FOX News Network, and the *Huffington Post, Hot Air, National Review* and *Daily Beast* blogs. The study sample was selected from these sources over a one-year period from October 1, 2010, to October 1, 2011.

Media stories were captured from the databases if they included at least five mentions of the words "education" or "learning." This threshold of number of mentions ensured that the sample squarely dealt with issues related to education and learning and avoided materials that mentioned education in passing, but that were not focused on education content or issues. The search strategy was also designed to be sufficiently broad so as to capture stories that covered a wide range of education issues and allow for analysis of more specific education issues, including skills and learning, assessment, educational disparities, structure of the education system, and education policies and programs. The initial capture procedure yielded 1,346 stories. Each of these media stories was assigned a number and researchers used a random number generator to select 570 stories that comprised the final study sample. Of these, 183 dealt squarely with issues related to disparities and were included for analysis for this report.

The media content analysis was conducted in two stages. First, FrameWorks researchers developed a codebook based on standard coding categories utilized in

previous FrameWorks content analysis research and in the framing literature more generally.[40] Those categories include:

1. Storytelling style (episodic vs. thematic)
2. Tone
3. Section of the newspaper
4. Age-group, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the students mentioned
5. Types of messengers/experts cited
6. Values
7. Mentions of specific policies and programs

In addition to the codes above, each story was coded for whether or not it addressed the following areas of interest: skills and learning, assessment, learning space and time, educational disparities, structure of the education system, education policies, and programs.

After the codebook was developed, three researchers were trained in its application. To test for inter-coder reliability, each researcher coded a set of 25 randomly selected media stories from the sample. The researchers achieved an inter-coder reliability score of 0.8 using Holsti's coefficient — indicating a respectable 80 percent agreement across the coded themes.[41] After the reliability test, we coded the remaining stories and subjected the resulting quantitative data to statistical analysis examining the frequency of codes within each category. In addition, selected cross-tabulations were computed to examine relationships between codes.

In the second stage of analysis, the sample was divided into the areas of interest and each area was subjected to a qualitative analysis of dominant narratives. In this stage, researchers analyzed the dominant frames that structured media discussion about skills and learning, assessment, learning space and time, educational disparities, structure of the education system, education policies, and programs. The results of these analyses are presented in separate reports.

Cognitive Analysis

The cultural models findings referred to in this document are based on over 70 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2008 and 2013 on issues related to education, including education and education reform, digital media and learning, skills and learning, assessment, learning space and time, and disparities. Consistent with interview methods employed in psychological anthropology, cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues.[42] Patterns of discourse, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample using a basic grounded theory approach to thematic analysis. These discourses were then analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, propositions and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an

individual's transcript and across the sample. In short, analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (shared, but taken-for-granted, assumptions).

Finally, to examine expert messages on education and learning, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with experts from the fields of education, psychology and early childhood development. These interviews were conducted in late 2011 to early 2012 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. To locate experts, FrameWorks surveyed a group of leading foundations working on education issues.

In the cognitive component of this analysis, FrameWorks researchers compared findings from the media analysis with results from the cultural models interviews in order to examine how media frames are likely to intersect with the cultural models that currently inform public thinking. This analysis addresses multiple patterns of intersection, including how media frames might (1) cue and strengthen existing cultural models, (2) conflict with or challenge existing models, and/or (3) fail to address a topic such that extant patterns of thinking are left to "fill in the blanks." The analysis also provides an etiological understanding of dominant media frames, as the relationship between frames in media and culture in mind is not unidirectional.[43] In this way, the media analysis enables FrameWorks to identify the likely cognitive impacts of media framing and to formulate strategic recommendations for experts and advocates who communicate about education and learning.

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