Using Rhetorical Analysis to Understand Agency and Strategy in Discursive Policy Analysis

DRAFT – DO NOT CITE

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Is fundraising in schools a way to engage parents and provide enrichment for students or is it a means of creating and perpetuating inequities between schools and communities? This paper presents findings from a larger study that aims to identify how People for Education (P4E), an education advocacy group in Ontario, Canada, has engaged in the struggle over the meaning of school fundraising policy in Ontario and to understand how its strategies are constrained by the policy's contexts. The paper highlights key rhetorical strategies P4E has used in its efforts to influence school fundraising policy in Ontario since 1996.

Theoretical Framework

This paper discusses findings from a larger study of policy advocacy grounded in critical policy analysis (CPA). The study is aligned with critical policy scholars who view policy problems, like the social world, as social constructions rather than objective realities. Individuals' personal histories, interests, and beliefs as well as global, national, provincial, and local discourses and contexts influence how policies are understood and enacted (Ball, 1993; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor, 1997; Winton & Brewer, 2013).

Policies, like all social phenomena, are discursively constructed (Fairclough 1992 in Fischer, 2003 p. 76). Discourses operate at multiple levels: "the broad cultural level and the everyday [micro] level of communicative interaction" (Fischer, 2003, p. 74). According to Fischer (2003), discourses at the cultural level "organize [policy] actors' understandings of reality without them necessarily being aware of it" (p. 74). Cultural discourses regularize thinking at particular historical moments and organize social action (Fischer, 2003). Cultural discourses give rise to individuals' theories about "how this bit of the social world works and ought to work" (Fulcher, 1999, p. 9). At the micro level, individuals and groups use discourses strategically in efforts to influence how others interpret social phenomenon.

Applying this understanding of discourse to policy, the meanings of policy texts, problems, and practices are not fixed but are struggled over as individuals and groups mobilize different discourses that reflect their theories of how the social world works or should work (Fulcher, 1999). These micro policy discourses are shaped and constrained by broader discourses of the historical moment. Not only do policy meanings vary but the very construction of a policy issue is historically contingent. Policy actors use a range of rhetorical strategies to persuade others to interpret particular social practices in a particular way (i.e., as a policy problem) and to respond to the issue in ways that reflect that understanding.

Rhetoric includes all "the ways in which we attempt to persuade or influence in our discursive, textual, and gestural practice" (Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon, & Usher, 2004, p. 13). It is recognized as an integral part of political processes but and has received limited attention in education policy research (Edwards, et al., 2004) and other fields of

policy studies (Gottweis, 2012). Gottweis (2012) explains that "where there is policy, there is persuasion, which is an interactive and material process that takes place with particular actors at a particular time and place" (p. 217). Rhetoric is multifaceted. Leach (2000) identifies the following elements: the rhetorical situation (including exigence and audience), persuasive discourses, and the five rhetorical canons (invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery). The canon of invention includes arguments that appeal to the audience's reason (logos), deeply held values and emotions (pathos), and confidence in the speaker (ethos; Selzer, 2004). The canon of disposition is concerned with how discourse is organized for rhetorical effect. Style, the third canon of rhetoric, is multidimensional and difficult to define (Corbett, 1999). It includes word choices, words' arrangement, figurative language, and conventions of reading, interpreting, and representing (Leach, 2000). The fourth canon, memory, was traditionally concerned with how well a speaker could memorize a speech. A contemporary reinterpretation of this canon considers the use of shared cultural memories as a rhetorical strategy (Lipsitz, 1990 in Leach, 2000). The canon of delivery has also been reinterpreted over time (Corbett, 1999). Historically, it was concerned with how well a speaker delivered a speech to an audience. Today, the canon of delivery is concerned with the relationship between the dissemination of rhetoric and its content (Leach, 2000).

Since the social world is discursively constructed, changing society requires changing dominant discourses. In terms of policy, changing policy requires changing policy discourses. This may involve the creation of new discourses and/or the re-ordering of existing discourses so that dominant discourses are replaced with previously subordinate ones. These discursive changes are brought about through argumentation by

social actors over time (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012). This paper presents People for Education's efforts to change fundraising policy through persuasion.

Methodological Approach

Twenty-six texts produced by P4E (including research reports, government submissions, and press releases) and 51 media articles published in Canadian newspapers were analyzed using rhetorical analysis to determine how P4E attempted to influence the meaning of school fees policy in Ontario, Canada, between 1996 and 2015. Rhetorical analysis "emphasizes the relationship between opposing argumentative positions" (Potter, 1996, p. 12) and "can be understood as an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language" (Selzer, 2004, p. 281). More specifically, rhetorical analysis identifies how arguments are constructed to persuade audiences to accept particular meanings of policy and support proposed courses of action (Winton, 2013).

Rhetorical analysis involves establishing a policy's rhetorical situation (including its exigence and audience); identifying persuasive discourses; and examining the five rhetorical canons (invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery; Leach, 2000). The canon of invention includes arguments that appeal to the audience's reason (logos), deeply held values and emotions (pathos), and confidence in the speaker (ethos; Selzer, 2004). The following section presents the study's preliminary findings of how P4E has defined fundraising and the rhetorical strategies the group has used from the canon of invention (i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos) in efforts to persuade others to adopt its definition.

Findings

What's the Problem? (Exigence)

Rhetorical analysis involves identifying how actors construct and define a problem to which a response is needed; Edwards and Nicoll (2001) refer to this as "identification of the exigence" (p. 105). Since 1996, People for Education has constructed the problem of fundraising as a practice that produces inequities between schools. Inequities arise because schools have communities of families with varying ability to raise funds; schools that can raise more money can offer their students resources and experiences that other schools cannot. P4E has mobilized this meaning of fundraising since their earliest days as the following excerpt from the group's submission to Ontario's Standing Committee on Social Development illustrates:

> Our principal came to use at the beginning of this year with a request for money to pay for things that we had in the past always considered to be basics, things that in the past had automatically been paid for by boards of education.

> Because of the huge cuts that have already happened over the last few years here in Toronto, principals seems to be having to make vary difficult choices: "Do I get new math books this year or do I get globes?... Not only did it worry us that our principal was having to make these kinds of choice, but it worried us that parents were being relied upon to support the school in these ways. We were no longer being asked to fund-raise for

extras, for team sweaters and graduation tea. We were being asked to fund-raise for essentials, for books, for maps and microscopes.

We became very concerned about what this reliance on parent fund-raising leads to. What happens in the communities where the parents don't have extra money for these things? What happens at the schools where they can only raise a few hundred dollars a year? What happens to the notion of equality among schools?" (P4E, 1996).

As the above quote demonstrates, at that time P4E viewed the differing abilities of parents to fundraise for *basic* needs of schools and students as contributing to the inequities between schools. P4E described parents as "the food banks of the system" in 2002 (Wong, 2002, p. F1). Over time, P4E modified its meaning somewhat; the group began arguing that inequities arise not only from schools' different abilities to fundraise for "basics" but also from their differing ability to raise money for *enrichment*. In 2013, for example, P4E states: "Ontario schools continue to rely on fees and fundraising to augment school budgets and cover the cost of enrichment. This reliance increases the gap between "have" and "have-not" schools" (P4E, 2013, p. 8).

Mobilizing Meaning

One of P4E's main strategies to appeal to logic has been the use of numbers to show that fundraising is a widespread and growing practice across the province. To obtain this and other data, P4E developed a survey of schools in collaboration with another parent group in 1998. P4E has conducted the survey every year since then and

produces an Annual Report of their findings. This survey has enabled P4E to track and report changes in fundraising over time. For example, in their 2009 report P4E reported that the percentage of schools raising more than $20 000 per year had increased from less than 10% in 2000/01 to more than 20% in 2008/09. Based on the ever-increasing amounts raised, P4E concluded there is "a growing dependence on fundraising to provide publicly-funded schools with resources" (People for Education, 2006, p. 1).

Statistics, graphs and numbers are also used to illustrate the size of the inequities between the amounts raised by schools. For example, in the 1999 Tracking Report P4E states "our survey showed that the amounts of fundraising per school ranged from $0 to $60,000. If this trend continues, inequity among schools is going to get worse" (P4E, 1999, p. 9). In 2013, P4E (2013) reported that "The top fundraising schools also have the highest average family incomes, and the top 10% raise as much as the bottom 81% combined" (p. 8). Findings from P4E's research are sometimes combined with others' findings to draw conclusions between funding and household income. In their 2011 *Fees and Fundraising* report, for example, P4E examined their data in light of that provided by the province's School Information Finder and claimed that "a high proportion of low-income families raise, on average, less than half the amount raised in schools with a low proportion of low-income families" (p. 1).

In addition to appeals to reason, P4E attempts to persuade through appeals to its audience's "most deeply and fervently held values" (Selzer, 2004, p. 284). In particular, the group argues that fundraising undermines Ontario public education's commitment to equal opportunity for all students. For example, in the group's 2001 Elementary Tracking Report (P4E, 2001) it states: "if we are to preserve the most important tenet of public

education – that every child deserves an equal chance to succeed – growing inequities in the system must be addressed immediately" (p. 3). By failing to do so, P4E explains that Ontario's children and future are at risk. They remind audiences of this central purpose of education in the *2012 Annual Report on Schools* (P4E, 2012) when they assert that "providing every child – rich or poor – with an equitable chance of success is one of the central missions of any publicly funded education system" (p. 8).

Violations of the commitment to equity, often through quotes provided by participants in P4E's surveys, are shared in their reports in efforts to generate emotional responses including anger, sympathy, and feelings of injustice. For example, the 2012 report shares this following perspective: "I think it's outrageous that some schools are allowed to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars so their children can have computers, music and all the extras while the other schools have nothing. Where is the equity in public education?" (P4E, 2012, p. 22).

The third facet of the canon of invention is ethos. Ethos includes the credibility and trust a speaker brings to the rhetorical situation by virtue of a formal position or reputation (situated ethos) and the ethos constructed by the speaker and/or the speaker's text (Selzer, 2004). P4E's efforts to establish its credibility with its audience in texts have changed over time. Initially, the group drew on their position as parents who were speaking from firsthand experience with begin asked to fundraise in schools. After they began conducting surveys of schools to determine the effects of policy decisions in schools P4E began referencing their research and research findings. They cited numbers from their surveys to support their claims and since they were (and remain) the only group to possess this data, their data was difficult to question. Their unique contribution

to the education policy landscape in Ontario helped strengthen their situated credibility. In addition, P4E often referred to other researchers with whom they work and/or who have made similar claims, suggesting their findings were credible and that experts supported their work. Their reports also contain quotes from principals, which suggests that P4E's meanings and concerns are shared by people in schools who are affected by the policy on daily basis. Finally, the group makes policy recommendations based on their research thereby constructing themselves as in a position to advise the government.

Other individuals and groups have contributed to the construction of P4E's ethos and helped establish the group's situated credibility. This has occurred through public accolades by journalists and elected officials, the group's frequent presence as experts in media reports, elected officials' references to the group and their research in the Ontario legislature, partnerships with diverse organizations and university researchers, the presence of high profile individuals at their events, P4E's membership on government advisory panels, and explicit recognition as key policy actors by diverse policy actors.

P4E uses a wide range of strategies and media to bring their arguments to the public, and like other aspects of their change efforts, these strategies have changed over time (Evans, Newman & Winton, 2015). Initially, P4E organized public protests outside Ontario's legislature; these protests often involved theatrical elements, such as actors dressed as well-known historical and fictional characters and musical performances. While P4E has not staged a dramatic protest in many years, they release their survey findings to the public in schools, libraries, and other spaces related to education. Their events garner media coverage, and indeed, P4E has worked purposefully to engage traditional media journalists (newspapers, radio, television) since the group's earliest

days. They continue to produce press releases, invite journalists to their events, provide reporters with story ideas, and foster cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with members of the press. Consequently, reporters regularly contact P4E for their perspective on education issues. The group's efforts to work with the media reflect their belief that "policy's not made by policy-makers" but that to change policy it is necessary to "influence the public" (P4E member, personal communication).

In addition to releasing their research findings and arguments through the press, P4E delivers its messages through self-published reports, a website, an online community, a monthly newsletter, numerous public speaking engagements, an annual conference, and various social media channels. The group has made submissions to various provincial government committees and advised government officials on education policy issues.

Influence?

In 2012, Ontario's government introduced the province's first *Fundraising Guideline* (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2012). In *The Fundraising Guideline* the OME defined fundraising as a way to engage parents and enrich students' experience. It challenged P4E's construction of fundraising as a means of addressing government funding shortfalls by explaining that fundraising is "used to complement, not replace, public funding for education" (p. 3). In addition *The Fundraising Guideline* addressed the issue of fundraising and equity by stating that fundraising activities must comply with the government's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and that schools should "consider the purposes and principles of public education, including diversity,

accessibility, and inclusivity" when engaging in fundraising (OME, 2012, p. 1). The establishment of *The Fundraising Guideline* and the government's apparent response to P4E's definition of fundraising as a practice that creates inequities therein might suggest that P4E has influenced fundraising policy in Ontario. Indeed, some might call it a policy "win". Importantly, however, fundraising and disparities between schools have continued to grow since *The Fundraising Guideline* was introduced (P4E, 2013; Winsa, 2015).

It seems then than despite 20 years of efforts, P4E (along with other individuals and groups that share and mobilize the same understanding of fundraising) has not been successful in persuading the public to adopt their definition of fundraising as a practice that creates inequities and change their practices. It may be that P4E simply has not been effective enough in their persuasive efforts. However, the broader cultural context within which P4E has engaged in the struggle over the meaning of fundraising is an important consideration as well. Key influences in this context on Ontario's fundraising policy since 1995 include: 1) neoliberalism, especially its emphasis on expectations for parenting; 2) Canadians' belief in meritocracy; 3) reduced government spending on public education as advocated by neoconservatism; 4) increased privatization of public education; 5) a history of parent fundraising in schools; and 6) dominant/alternative meanings of school fundraising.

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