A Narrative Policy Framework Analysis of Charter School Editorials in Local Media

Nevbahar Ertas & Andrew N. McKnight, University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract

Policy debates about charter schools are often dominated by polarizing emotional narratives. However scholarly attention on narratives in education policy, and especially narratives about charter schools in local contexts, has been limited. The recently developed Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach offers guidelines to systematically study the narrative elements and strategies that policy actors use to influence policy debates. Relying on NPF, we conducted a content analysis of editorials and op-eds on charter schools from three local newspapers published in the 10 year period before the adoption of the legislation to answer the following questions: How did the editorials and op-eds in local newspapers cover charter schools prior to adoption of the legislation? Specifically, is it possible to identify core structural elements e.g. setting, characters, plot, and morals of policy stories in these narratives? Do these elements differ by endorsed policy solution? Narrative elements in the form of policy solutions, story types, causal mechanisms, and characters were identifiable, and their use differed by the endorsed policy solution. The concluding section discusses the role of local policy stories in public policy making, and proposes directions for future research.

Keywords: *Narrative policy framework, charter schools, policy narratives, education policy, policy stories, local media*

Introduction

Policy debates in the public arena are increasingly dominated by polarizing emotional narratives. Education policy is no exception. Some scholars even contended that the politics of educational policy can best be explained by a theory of political spectacle, "with directors, stages, cast of actors, narrative plots, and a curtain that separates the action on stage—what the audience has access to—from the backstage, where the real 'allocation of values' takes place" (Smith et al., 2004, p. 11). As the American public has increasingly been subjected to political hyperbole concerning the success, failure, and goals of public schools, numerous reform efforts have been introduced by national, state, and local policymakers. One such policy is introduction of charter schools, defined as "a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state, district, or other entity" (NCES, 2019). Educators, policy makers, advocates, and skeptics disagree about almost every issue concerning charter schools from their purpose to their effects on achievement, equity or accountability. High levels of disagreement

is often associated with larger ideological conflicts, and selective use of evidence and divergent narratives (Carnoy et al., 2005, Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Henig, 2008).

While similar education reforms are spreading globally, the way in which they translate into local policy practices is based on constant and active reinterpretation and modification by local political actors (Verger, 2014, p. 15). Nevertheless scholarly attention on narratives in education policy, and especially narratives about charter schools in local contexts, has been limited. This study aims to fill this gap by relying on the recently developed Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach, which offers guidelines to systematically study the narrative elements and strategies that policy actors use to influence policy debates (Jones and McBeth, 2010). Focusing on editorials and op-eds in local newspapers, this study asks: How did the editorials and op-ed articles in local newspapers cover charter schools prior to adoption of the legislation? Specifically, is it possible to identify core structural elements, e.g., setting, characters, plot, and morals of policy stories in these narratives? Do these elements differ by endorsed policy solution? The paper starts with a brief introduction of the policy issue and the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), followed by a discussion of the methodological approach and primary findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of policy implications, observations about convergence and divergence between local narratives and nationwide charter politics, and suggestions for future research.

The key role of language and narrative stories in problem definition are well demonstrated in research literature (Fischer, 2003). We argue that it is important to pay attention to the nature and quality of charter school policy stories in circulation not only nationwide, but also in the local context, because those narratives shape opinions about problems and therefore policy solutions in education. The state of Alabama provides the setting of our case study, since whether or not to adopt charter schools has been discussed in the state for a number of years, and it was one of the last eight states without charter school legislation until the charter bill was approved and signed by the governor in March 2015. This study aims to contribute to two lines of literature. First, the analyses would be of interest to NPF scholars, since education policy in general, and charter schools in particular, are an understudied policy area within the NPF scholarship. Second, the findings would be of interest to education policy scholars, especially those interested in charter schools, politics of education, and the intersection between press and political actors and processes.

The Policy Issue: Charter Schools

Currently close to 7000 charter schools operate across the United States and almost 3 million students attend them. While this is only 6% of public school students in the country, enrollment in charter schools has increased more than three fold in the last 10 years and expected to increase further in the near future (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The policy proliferated rapidly across forty three states and the District of Columbia. The state of Alabama, the target of this case study, was one of the last eight without charter school legislation until 2015 when the charter bill was approved.

Unlike most education policy issues, debate on charter schools and charter school research has uncharacteristically been held in the public arena[1] (Henig, 2008, p. 66) and the public contro-

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1. While many education policy issues are constant and heated points of public discourse, news reporting on schools and education research is scant. A Brookings Institute report estimated that less 2 percent of national news coverage dealt with education in 2009 and most of the coverage was not about education research (see West et.al. at https://www.brookings.edu/research/invisible-1-4-percent-coverage-for-education-is-not-enough/). However, charter

versy was fueled by the charter school movement's ties to "the high ideas of systemic privatization" (Henig, 2008, p. 35). However, charter schools were a much more palatable policy option than previous privatization based policy options like voucher policies. School voucher programs provide subsidies to parents for tuition at any school, effectively enabling students to attend at private schools at public expense. In publicly funded voucher programs, many of the private schools that are recipients are religious organizations and this has raised transparency and accountability questions and the idea of vouchers was not embraced by the public at large after the initial experiments in a handful of states.[2] Charter schools on the other hand "began to spread, unusually rapidly for a new policy idea with more or less built-in opposition from several powerful interests and no evidence to yet back it up" (Henig, 2008, p. 51). This was partially facilitated by the state level entrepreneurs, since state legislatures were able to shape the state charter laws to adapt to localized political conditions (Mintrom, 2000). While some states opted for minimal regulatory oversight, others adopted caps, teacher certification requirements, term limits, and extended oversight practices. Another redeeming feature of charter schools over vouchers was the fact that they were still referenced as public schools.[3]

Charter schools are considered to be public schools because they receive federal and state funding on a per student basis, they are prohibited by law from charging tuition, they are not allowed to use special admission criteria to keep the schools open to all eligible students, and they are approved and overseen by public entities (Henig, 2008). Mead (2003) summarized features that have traditionally marked a distinction between private and public education in state charter school laws as those related to establishment of charter schools. These have included "the sponsorship of charter schools, the conversion of private schools to charter schools, the provisions for home schools and cyber schools, the involvement of for-profit charter school management companies, and the finality of decision made by charter-granting authorities" (Mead, 2003, p. 357). Differences related to operations focused on "tuition, the application of health and safety standards, and the standards guide revocation, charter renewal and non-renewal decisions, and contract enforcement" (Mead, 2003, p.357). In some states, chartering authority is granted to nonprofit private entities governed by a private board, in addition to or in place of local education agencies (LEAs) governed by elected school boards. Many states also permit private boards of directors to operate charter schools, while traditional public schools are governed by the LEAs and the governing

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school research have become an exception in the summer of 2004, when a American Federation of Teachers(AFT) study critical of charter schools, were covered by the New York Times, and has garnered a swift backlash by elected and appointed officials, academics, and advocacy organizations. A full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* paid for by the pro-charter group Center on Education Reform and signed by a group of 31 academics, questioning the quality of analysis in the AFT report has spurred a heated and very public controversy. See *The Charter School Dust Up* by Martin Carnoy, Rebecca Jacobsen, Lawrence Mishel, and Richard Rothstein (2005), and *The Spin Cycle: How Research Gets Used in Policy Debates--The Case of Charter Schools* by Jeffrey R. Henig (2008)) for an in-depth discussion about the scope of controversy that erupted in the summer of 2004 and the reasons behind its uncharacteristically public nature.

2. A more recent attempt by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos of the Trump administration brought vouchers back onto the policy agenda. See Strauss, V., Douglas-Gabriel, D. & Balingit, M. (2018, February 13). DeVos seeks cuts from Education Department to support school choice. *The Washington Post*. Congress rejected DeVos' efforts to spend more than $1 billion on private school vouchers and other school choice plans in 2017 and 2018, however, plans for the federal expansion of school vouchers are likely to continue.

3. It should be noted that this assertion is contested. For example, in 2015, the Supreme Court of Washington ruled that public funding alone does not make charter schools truly public schools because they aren't governed by elected boards and therefore not accountable to voters. See Brown, E. (2015, September 9). What makes a public school public? Washington state court finds charter schools unconstitutional. *The Washington Post*.

boards may contract a private entity, or educational management organization (EMO), to manage and operate the school. A review of recent and pending litigations and state charter legislations has shown that state statutory requirements are often not clear on "whether charter schools and their officials are public entities under the law, and thus subject to the same rules governing the action of public officials" (Green, Baker, & Oluwole, 2015, p. 240). Charter school teachers and administrators are usually not considered public employees and the buildings in which they operate are not typically public property. Most charter schools employ non-unionized teachers at will, meaning that they may require teachers to work longer hours, are not required to provide tenure, or a cause for termination. Unionization efforts of charter school teachers have resulted in different outcomes in different states. In the case of a New Orleans school, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), as well as the Federal appellate court concluded that charter school teachers are private employees; however the ruling also indicates that the designation does not apply to all charter schools, noting another NLRB decision designating a Texas charter as a political subdivision, citing that the Texas Education Agency has authority to reconstitute the charter school's board, which is not the case in the Louisiana legislation (Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, 2018). The ongoing litigation for collective bargaining cases, variation in state legislations, and existence of various charter affiliates such as operators, authorizers, and managers would undoubtedly complicate issues regarding their status as public entities.

There have been attempts to garner support for creation of charter schools in Alabama, but various charter legislation proposals died in the legislature over the course of 10 years, until March 2015. The main political actors in this policy area are legislators, public school administrators, public school systems, the teacher union Alabama Education Association (AEA), the pro free market and limited government think tank Alabama Policy Institute (API), the Alabama Federation for Children (AFC), an affiliate of the national advocacy group American Federation for Children, and the Alabama branch of Students First, a political lobbying organization formed by the well-known U.S. public school reform advocate Michelle Rhee. The arguments from these advocacy groups mirror concerns identified in the larger school-choice politics literature. A brief review of API documents shows an emphasis on choice, innovation, autonomy, flexibility, and deregulation (API, 2013). On the other hand, AEA documents emphasize critique of the financial model, privatization, deregulation, and the de-professionalization of teaching (AEA, 2013). Many public school administrators and public school systems have sided with AEA in opposition to previous legislation proposals. Over time, the pro-charter lobbying efforts have been expanded in the state as national advocacy groups established branches in the state. The level of public support is not clear. Two opinion polls conducted by groups affiliated with the two major advocacy coalitions showed stark differences in support. The pro-charter poll showed 45% of Alabamians support charter schools, while the anti-charter poll showed 35% of Alabamians supported charter schools (Leech, 2012). Furthermore, both argue the support increased or declined after they provide more information to their respondents. One study suggested that a sizable proportion of Alabamians have no knowledge of and opinion about charter schools (Anon, 2016). Although it has been three years since lawmakers passed the law, there have not been many applications. As of March 2018, there are few approved applications but no operational charter school in the state.

The Narrative Policy Framework

The main focus of NPF is to explain the role of policy narratives in the policy process, typically in reference to policy actors, their decisions and actions, and policy outcomes. Policy

scholars Michael D. Jones and Marc McBeth (2010) developed the framework in an effort to reconcile policy scholarship on narratives. A variety of disciplines including education and critical policy analysis scholars (e.g. Fischer, 2003; Roe, 1994; and Stone, 1997) study the politics of storytelling. Smith and Larimer (2017) use the term 'policy design' as a broader category of scholarship to refer to the systematic examination of substantive content of policy. For critical policy scholars, the examination of substantive content of policy requires putting the emphasis on the careful construction and deliberate and selective use of stories, symbols, and images around particular policies. According to Smith and Larimer (2017), the underlying similarity among these earlier critical policy design scholars "is their resolve to move away from strict, empirical analyses of public policy" (p. 72). The critical issue for scholars like Fischer (2003) or Stone (1997) was to identify whose values were supported by policy and who values were used to justify and evaluate policy success. The idea is that the policy narratives as social constructions are messy and their study should also reflect the complicated and subjective reality of the policy making process. Yet, positivist policy scholars were skeptical that such policy design scholarship was clear enough to provide clear research guidance, for example, renowned policy scholar Paul Sabatier excluded post-positivist policy scholarship in his influential 1999 book Theories of the Policy Process (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Jones and McBeth (2010) developed the NPF as a response in an attempt to develop individual and sub-system level hypotheses to study policy narratives in an empirical and quantifiable manner. According to NPF, narratives "both socially construct reality and can be measured empirically" (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018, p. 174), and consequently that there is room for both interpretative and observational narrative scholarship.

The NPF attempts to offer a methodological approach based on a set of assumptions to guide scholars interested in studying policy narratives. Existence of generalizable structural elements in the form of setting, characters, plot, and morals common to policy narratives is one of the central assumption of the NPF theory. In addition to the core structural elements, NPF also postulates a storytelling model of individual, a socially constructed policy reality that is shaped by predictable factors such as political ideologies and belief systems, and three interacting levels of analysis: individual, group, and cultural/institutional (Shanahan et al., 2018). The individual/micro-level analysis focuses on the influence of narratives on the individual; the group/meso-level analysis focuses on policy narratives as they are developed, circulated, and shaped by interest groups or advocacy coalitions, and cultural/institutional/ macro-level analysis focuses the conditions and environments under which macro level narratives develop and persist, as well as their influence on policy stability and change (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 3).

According to (Shanahan et al., 2018), "newspapers are often the best early source for policy narratives about local issues or issues with a particular geographic domain" (p. 10). A number of NPF studies have turned to newspapers as sources of policy narratives (e.g., Blair & McCormack, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2011; Shanahan et al., 2013).

Methodology

In order to provide an in-depth case study of narrative elements in stories on charter schools, the analyses focus on one state, where the proposed charter legislation has led to a charged debate in the last few years regarding whether or not to adopt charter school legislation, and content

analysis of editorials and op-eds on charter schools from three local[4] newspapers published in the 10 year period before the adoption of the legislation from 2006 to 2016. In order to allow for more diversity of perspectives, articles were collected from three sources; Montgomery Advertiser, Al.com, and Anniston Star. These represent high circulation news outlets in the state. Montgomery Advertiser is Central Alabama's leading news source and paper of the state capitol (32,847 in circulation). AL.com is the largest news site in the state of Alabama, owned by Alabama Media Group along with Alabama's three largest and most prominent newspapers: The Birmingham News (103,729 in circulation), The Huntsville Times (44,725 in circulation) and Mobile's Press-Register (82,088 in circulation). Finally, we also included the Anniston Star (19,563 in circulation) as a representative outlet for a smaller Alabama town, which is represented in the Alabama senate by the sponsor of the charter bill, Senator Del Marsh.

"Charter schools" and "school choice" were used as key search terms and the search dates spanned from January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2016. This initial search generated 28 articles from Montgomery Advertiser, 66 articles from AL.com, and 89 articles from Anniston Star. We read all articles and initially removed those that were not related to charter schools directly. This reduced the pool from 183 to 150 articles. We sorted the remaining articles into three categories as descriptive and neutral pieces (n=98), failed attempts at being neutral (n=6), and position pieces (n=46)[5]. This analyses focus on the position pieces. Two researchers read and coded each documents independently using a codebook. The codebook focused on identifying structural elements in policy narratives as defined by NPF theory. The unit of analysis was the document, as opposed to sentence or paragraph. After coding articles independently, the coders went over each document together and discussed the content with regard to policy solutions, context, characters, and themes. The inter-coder agreement levels are consistent with previous NPF research using media stories (Crow and Lawlor, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2013). Table 1 provides summary information about the documents.

Table 1. *Descriptive information on narratives*

	% (n)
Policy Solution (n=46)	
Approve charter schools or legislation	67% (31)
Oppose charter schools	33% (15)
Source	
AL.com	24% (11)
Anniston Star	70% (32)
Montgomery Advertiser	7% (3)
Year	
2009	13% (6)
2010	24% (11)

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4. The focus on 'local' is primarily intended as state level. Sometimes the references example refer to municipal or metropolitan level anecdotes and this is reflective of the geographical locations of the periodicals and newspapers under examination. Since they are being produced for a sub-state market, the focus tend to shift to smaller locales.

5. The opinion pieces include editorials as well as op-eds that takes an explicit policy position. Descriptive and neutral pieces are reports of factual information on charter school related news. A few pieces that appeared as neutral news articles, but contained a personal attitude toward the facts or skewing of details to better align an issue with an agenda or a policy position are categorized as failed attempts at being neutral.

2011	7% (3)
2012	26% (12)
2013	2% (1)
2014	4% (2)
2015	24% (11)
Stance	
Winning (supports the policy environment and actions discussed in the narrative)	41% (19)
Losing (the group is under attack even if they are partially winning)	44% (20)
No stance	15% (7)
Number of story type	
0	2% (1)
1	61% (28)
2	33% (15)
3	4% (2)
Primary story type	
Appeal to innovation	58% (26)
Appeal to risk	36% (36)
Conspiracy	2% (1)
Helplessness and control	2% (1)
Story of decline	2% (1)
Primary Causal Mechanism	
No causal mechanism	41% (19)
Bureaucratic/systemic	30% (14)
Incompetence/apathy	9% (4)
Inequitable socioeconomic circumstances	13% (6)
societal/cultural factors	7% (3)

Participant quotes, identified in block quotes or quotation marks, are included as supportive illustrations of particular observations. The numbers in parentheses near each quote simply identify the narrative from which the quote comes from in our data set. When appropriate, statistical test (chi-square or t-test) results are presented as part of the tables. Despite reflecting a diversity of sources and relatively long time frame, this sample is clearly not representative of all charter school policy narratives in the state. Therefore, it is important to note explicitly that the goal of this project is not generalizability in the traditional sense, but rather to develop "moderatum generalizations" that can be tested with further work (Payne and Williams, 2005). We adopted Yin's (2002) case study logic, which differentiates between "statistical generalization" (generalization to some defined population that has been sampled) and "analytic generalization" (generalization to a theory of the phenomenon being studied). The goal was to provide insight into the phenomenon being studied (in this case, elements of charter school policy narratives in a state before policy adoption), and to help refine a theory (in this case, the NPF theory).

Research Findings

According to NPF, what makes a story a policy narrative are the four core structural elements, i.e., setting, characters, plot, and moral, which can be identified and used to understand how narratives influence policy change and outcomes across a variety of policy contexts (Shanahan et al., 2011). These articles contained clear narrative elements in the form of setting, policy solutions, plots, and characters. The policy *setting* for these articles is the charter school policy adoption in the state of Alabama. The policy narratives are typically populated by heroes, villains, and victims, as specific characters. Both local and national policy actors and the target groups for the policy have been portrayed as such characters in the narrative arc of these stories. The moral of the story is the policy solution offered. The main morals of narratives under investigation were "approve charter school legislation" and "oppose charter school legislation". A few pieces contained slight nuances within these larger morals. For example, some pro-charter pieces suggested certain reservations for approval demanding rigorous charter school legislation that ensure local control or accountability or undue financial burden. Some anti-charter pieces include suggestions about alternate actions in addition to opposing charter schools, for example, funneling federal dollars to low socioeconomic students in urban and rural areas. Inspired by the idea of story lines in Stone's book *Policy Paradox* (1997), the NPF also asserts that policy narratives must have a plot (Shanahan et al., 2011). The plot typically features a beginning, a middle, and an end, and causality, in other words, connections among the characters, and assigning of intent or blame. Here, the plot was examined by tracking two strategies—story type and causal mechanism.

The second question was whether these elements differ by endorsed policy solution and the answer is partially affirmative. Most policy narratives regardless of the policy solution or stance shared certain characteristics. However, the pro-charter and anti-charter articles used different story types, causal mechanisms, and characters. The next section details these differences in story type, causal mechanism, and characters by policy solutions proffered.

Story Type

Policy narratives provide explanations for policy problems and solutions. The articles examined portrayed charter schools as a policy problem, or at least a distraction from the real problems, or a policy solution based on the policy preference of the writer. The policy narratives primarily stressed either an appeal to innovation or an appeal to risk. Lesser stories included either a story of conspiracy, a story of helplessness and lack of control, or a story of decline. Table 2 summarizes primary story type by policy solution and shows that appeal to innovation was exclusively used by pro-charter narratives. The pro-charter narratives were also more likely than anti-charter narratives to use themes of helplessness and control and story of decline as primary story types. Anti-charter narratives typically used appeals to risk.

Table 2. *Primary story type, causal mechanism, and number of characters by policy solution*

	Approve charter schools (n=31)	Oppose charter schools (n=15)	χ^2 or *t*
Primary story type			31.6299***
Appeal to innovation	87%	-	

Appeal to risk	12%	100%	
Causal mechanism			7.1829***
No causal mechanism	56%	13%	
One or more causal mechanisms	45%	87%	
Characters			
Characters	3.581	4.333	-1.3771
Heroes	1.226	.667	2.2799*
Villains	1.387097	2.133333	-2.6569*
Victims	.9677419	1.533333	-2.9188***

Note: ***p<.01; **p<.05; *p<.1

The first and dominant story type among the articles were appeals to innovation, i.e., claims that charter schools would be successful via innovations in school infrastructure, school culture, and curriculum and instruction. These ranged from more nuanced descriptions of some of the innovations charters were capable of, and what kinds of students would likely most benefit from them, to full throated declarations of their superiority. Some of the articles began with a description of the former including a focus on the classics of Western civilization, entrepreneurship, foreign languages, or project-based learning, while others simply assume charter schools would be innovative, just because they would be free of bureaucratic regulations and the 'monopolistic' political control of public education. The prevalence of innovation stories is not surprising. It is hard to imagine any other education reform that has generated such a widespread political effort to associate charter schools with innovation (see Lubienski, 2003 for a review). A majority of charter legislation specifies innovation, mostly in teaching or learning, as an expected outcome. Although the existing research show that charter schools are not typically more innovative than traditional public schools when it comes to teaching methods, education practices, or materials (Fabricant & Fine, 2015; Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012; Lubienski, 2003), and that most innovations have been in governance, teacher tenure, and school marketing, authors using an appeal to innovation were confident in their expectation. Here is an exemplary quote from one such article,

> Their [charter schools'] independence from the typical school-district formula allows them the opportunity to build a better mousetrap, to reach the goal of highly educated Alabamians through alternative means…The trick is creating a system of charter schools that are accountable to basic standards while unrestrained enough to think outside the box. [29]

The second most common story type was labeled appeal to risk. These stories tended to emphasize themes like charter schools' tendency to waste resources and/or take money from public schools, and the expectation that they would be autonomous to the point of being unaccountable. The former points were usually coupled with a discussion of how Alabama's schools are under-resourced to begin with. Discussion of risks is also common in charter school politics. What distinguishes the discussion in this local context is the focus on a narrower set of risks. Initially a dominant theme in the pro-narratives was the loss of federal grant funds though President Obama's Race to the Top initiative. Adoption of charter schools were portrayed as a prerequisite for Ala-

bama to get federal grants, and in extreme cases, the anti-charter positions were portrayed as sabotage. In fact, in the 2010 round for Race to the Top federal education grant allocation, the state of Alabama ranked lowest among all states on a points system scoring. If the state had adopted charter schools at that time, the additional points gained would have not been enough to make any difference in the rankings. This focus has shifted as Alabama failed to receive funds. Anti-charter stories also primarily focused on loss of funding and accountability, often in the context of infringement of local control of schools. Pursuant, the then head of the state's teacher's union stated the following: "We know what works to improve Alabama education. We simply lack the funding. We know that charters are unproven, but are guaranteed to take needed resources away from already underfunded schools" [8]. Although less frequent than the first two story types discussed some of the articles included elements describing how the education situation was getting steadily worse in Alabama. This was primarily a position taken by those who supported charter school legislation.

A "story of decline" as conceived by political theorist Deborah Stone is a symbolic plot device to create emotional rather than rational response to policy issues and resemble the Biblical story of expulsion from Paradise—a deterioration of once-good conditions and ever-increasing suffering—typically ending with "a prediction of crisis" (Stone, 1997, p. 109). The other broad type of narrative was a "story of helplessness and control," which typically explains that how things were bad and seemed helpless, until we figured out a way out and promise control over fate (Stone, 1997, p. 142). The idea that educational reform was hindered by influences beyond the control of political actors and those who voted for them was particularly popular with those who supported charter schools early on in the legislative process. One twist on the control story is the *conspiracy* plot. This version argues that things have been controlled in nefarious ways all along and that we must take control back from these hidden powers (Stone, 1997, p. 142). Themes of conspiracy were exclusively expressed by those who opposed the establishment of charter schools. These commenters generally expressed two main concerns. The first maintained that charter schools were vehicles for enriching the companies that would be managing them and also generally bankrupting the public system. One author was particularly vivid: "Some educational salesmen will consume school funds like vultures eating at a decaying carcass. They will linger around until schools' coffers are bare-boned. The public has become alarmed and demands greater financial accountability" (p. 27). The second concern was that charter schools actually represented the advent for the privatization of public education, writ large—that charter schools served as a kind of Trojan horse for market driven solutions that would end in the disestablishment of public schools. In sum, charter schools were framed as either flexible innovators or instruments of destruction.

One intriguing aspect of these local policy stories has to do with the issues that have not been referenced, in addition to those that were. The highlights of charter schools in pro-charter narratives are pretty in sync with nationwide discourse. This is not the case for critical pieces. Several points of contention that has been subject of scholarly research and covered by national media outlets has not made their way into those local narratives. Perhaps this is reflective of a policy environment that is yet to have real experience with charter schools or this might be an inherent characteristic of critical versus favorable narratives, which might suggest an avenue for future narrative researchers. Academics critical of charter schools and a number of educational reporters in national outlets have brought up a number of other risks and potential problems, in addition to resource drain and accountability issues. Three major areas of concern are issues related to segregation and stratification, teacher certification and quality, and the expanding role of corporate and private interest groups in public policy making in education.

One point of contention is about equity and access, specifically, whether these schools are ameliorating or contributing to wider patterns of segregation. Evidence indicates that charter schools are as racially segregated as public schools in their same area and sometimes contribute to further racial isolation (Frankenberg et al., 2011; Lubienski and Weitzel, 2010). Another aspect of equity concerns relate to access and socio-economic stratification. Critics and scholars have argued that disadvantaged parents do not have the ability or resources to choose charter schools (Garcia, 2008) and that the choice is made often by charter schools, rather than parents, since they have a strong incentive to target and select students, both leading to stratification (West et al., 2006). These issues are also covered in media outlets (see for example (Greenblatt, 2018; McCoy, 2016; Sharp, 2010). Segregation or stratification were not discernible themes in these local charter school policy narratives from Alabama newspapers.

Another concern voiced often is about teacher quality, and specifically, certification (Iasevoli, 2017; Stein, 2018). State certification requirements for public charter school teachers vary. Many charter schools do not require teachers to meet the same certification requirements as public school teachers, some certify their teachers themselves, and some hire teachers without certification. This feature has been embraced and detested by different advocacy coalitions in the policy subsystem. Advocates emphasize that this enables schools to be innovative in their hiring practices, flexible to choose from a broader pool, and to remove unsuccessful teachers, and offer them freedom from bureaucratic requirements. Critics call attention to de-professionalization of teaching and potential commercialization of certification process. There were some references pin-pointing teacher quality as the source of Alabama's education woes in some narratives. A former public school teacher who went on to found a private school stated, "we just haven't moved forward like the rest of the world has moved. I could go back to the school I taught at in 1970 and teach the same way. Nothing has changed" (6). Another took this sentiment farther by linking teacher mediocrity to the state teacher's union being a hindrance to change. However, these were piecemeal arguments against status quo of public schools. Teacher certification and the broader issue of teacher quality in charter schools were not discussed in these local policy narratives.

Finally, one other issue gaining prominence in nationwide charter school discussion is the infusion of private foundation funding in charter schools and the expanding role of private interest groups in public policy making in education. Reckhow and Snyder (2014) showed that between 2000 and 2010, the foundation funding for traditional public schools dropped in half, while funding for charter schools rose from around 3% to 16%, corresponding to over 110 million dollars. Such shifts in priority have not gone unnoticed. Critical scholars point out the ways in which the corporate and private philanthropic influence on education policymaking undermines the democratic control of public education (Au and Lubienski, 2016; Lubienski et al., 2016; Ravitch, 2010). The nationwide media coverage of charter schools and foundation funding also increased during this time (Chandler, 2015; Medina & Goldstein, 2019). However, the influence of corporate and private foundations on charter school politics were mentioned superficially in only a few of these local charter school policy narratives.

Causal Mechanism

The second strategy to examine plot was tracking causal mechanisms. Identifying causes enables us to assign responsibility for problems (Stone, 1997). Policy narratives that identify a cause tell a story that portrays both oppressors and victims. Nevertheless, causal mechanisms were

not as clearly identifiable as story types in these narratives. Overall, about 40% of narratives offered no causal mechanism and the pro-charter narratives were more likely than anti-charter narratives to lack a causal mechanism. Many pro-charter narratives championed the policy and its benefits unequivocally without logically relating the course of events to desirable educational outcomes. 87% of anti-charter narratives, compared to 45% of pro-charter narratives suggested one or more causal mechanism for policy problems. The kind of causal mechanism was coded as bureaucratic/systemic, incompetence/apathy, inequitable socioeconomic circumstances, societal/cultural factors or a combination of any.

Bureaucratic/systemic causal category generally spoke to school aged students and their parents lacking agency concerning lack of access to what they would deem high quality educational offerings. There is a sense here that the system itself conspires to keep some students in substandard schools due to the state's vast collection of independent school districts and geographical demographics. This reasoning was employed mostly by pro-charter narratives. One author summed up this sentiment as follows: "I don't want to see our students in any part of Alabama get stuck in a failing school because they don't have another choice because of where they live"[14].

Narratives using the causal mechanism labeled as incompetence/apathy elicited a sense of institutional exacerbation that there are controlling actors who do not seem to care or know how to care sufficiently, to challenge the current way public schools operate. This reasoning was exclusively used by pro-charter narratives and almost always associated incompetence and apathy to characters. Early on in the legislative process the lawmakers were dealt a setback when a bill they advanced to start charter schools was defeated. In reference to this, political actors and legislatures were deemed incompetent and apathetic. Later in the process, teacher unions, teachers, ineffectual parents, and out-of-touch bureaucrats were also a labeled as such.

Others located the cause for charter school with the inequitable way Alabama supports its public school. This particular mechanism, which we labeled as inequitable socioeconomic circumstances, was mostly deployed by anti-charter factions. These narratives describe particular instances of socioeconomic arguments at times to contend that the charter schools does not address the issue at hand, e.g., the extent of the lack of resources in urban and rural Alabama schools, or Alabama's racist past and present as providing additional context for why an initial version of legislation would only allow for charter schools to be created in predominantly low socioeconomic areas of the state.

Finally, the mechanism of societal/cultural factors differs from the others that speak to the dynamic of the system itself, whether political or educational, and to the socioeconomic situation of the state. We reserved this category to catch statements that were more universal and theoretical in nature. For instance one author wrote felt compelled to separate the mechanics of education from the ethical arguments for doing so. He stated, "but, public education as a value — a philosophy — differs from the delivery system of public education. How we impart knowledge to children should not be confused with why we do so" [39]. Another spoke to the troubles a specific part of Alabama's population has in receiving an adequate public education in the state. Overall, when causal mechanisms were offered, they resembled policy narratives in nationwide charter school politics. Pro-charter narratives conceive the problem with the education system as stemming from a stolid bureaucratic structure and corrupt politics maintained by unresponsive and uncaring policy actors. Anti-charter narratives conceive the problem as resource inequities stemming from and preserved by racial and socioeconomic disparities.

Characters

Overall, anti-charter stories were less likely than pro-charter stories to use characters, but when they do, they were more likely to refer to multiple characters. Most popular characters for both pro and anti-charter stories are victims and the least common characters are heroes. Table 3 presents the average number of heroes, villains, and victims for each policy solution.

Table 3. *Number of narrative characters by policy solution*

	Approve charter schools		Oppose charter schools		*Total*	
	# of narratives	# of characters	# of narratives	# of characters	# of narratives	# of characters
Heroes	26	38	9	10	35	48
Villains	24	30	15	23	39	53
Victims	28	43	15	32	43	75
Total	78	111	39	65	117	176

Pro-charter narratives were significantly more likely to feature hero characters and anti-charter narratives were significantly more likely to feature villains and victims. In short, heroes are hard to find in most of these narrative, especially anti-charter ones, as the tendency was to explain why the other side had it wrong. While initially some may hold up a hero—themselves or other actors—the majority of their rhetoric was negative. Thus a majority of the positions discussed in the paper fall within the villain category. Republican policymakers positioned themselves as an early hero in the cause to create charter schools. In 2010 Republicans won a majority in the state senate and house for the first time since 1874; they were the party with the most amount of interest in charter schools. There was also a tendency of charter proponents to tout the broad bipartisan support for charter schools at the national level. One author proffered the following while also making sure to include a villain at the end.

Charter schools have received bipartisan support from diverse political figures including Newt Gingrich, Al Sharpton, Jeb Bush and President Obama. Public charter schools also are supported by the group Democrats for Education Reform, which calls them 'an important alternative to traditional public schools.' Unfortunately, but entirely predictable, the Alabama Education Association [AEA] remains steadfast in its opposition. [16]

One of the primary villains in the pro-charter articles were teachers and more specifically their state union, the Alabama Education Association. Concerning the former, one author implied that charter schools are a direct response to poor teacher accountability in the state:

Regardless if a student can read or add, the teachers' union is paid to fight for teachers — good or bad. That's what tenure is all about. How about teachers scrutinizing each other? That could reduce the need for charter schools…I'm not against unions, but with power comes arrogance. [28]

Another seemed to take the side of the AEA if only to tacitly recognize their power as an inevitable distraction toward providing a better education for Alabama's public school students: "an agenda concentrated on charter schools…is not much about improving education as it is about drawing a line in the sand for another battle with the Alabama Education Association…This will only waste resources and energy and will once again make schoolkids the rope in a political tug of war" [4]. Others were less unequivocal in their opinions about the unions in general and AEA in particular.

Legislatures and policymakers were also popular villains named by both pro and anti-charter narratives. One such example portended that some legislators may try to use charter school legislation as a way to reward themselves:

> Lest we forget, consider also the fact that there is great need to be concerned about judges who may tend to become overly active outside their arena. We must also be aware and not ignore these same overreaching activities by lawmakers who often present deceptively to gain personal control. (This act is commonplace.) [36]

While others questioned the motivations for supporting the legislation as being less than pure: "some legislators now want to take even more funds away from public schools. Does that sound like they have the best interests of Alabama children—all Alabama children—in their hearts?" [41]

Private Education Management Organization (EMOs), corporate entities, and lobbyists made up the remaining villains. Concerning the first two of these it was widely believed that, as stated before, charter schools represented a Trojan horse designed to funnel money from the public system to private providers. Lobbyists were also seen as having an undue influence on the legislative process and having unclear motives.

Most prevalent characters were victims. There were three main victims discussed in many of the narratives. In order of emphasis these were students, teachers, and tax payers. The victimhood of the children was common in both pro and anti-charter narratives. One author summarized the sentiment by stating "either way, the state and the children it must educate are the ultimate losers" [26]. Anti-charter narratives depict teachers as victims typically because they work in resource poor school systems. Teachers were positioned as existing in sometimes untenable situations caused by a lack of support. As example one commentator stated,

> Teachers have screamed for years for smaller class sizes, only to be told it wasn't necessary. Teachers have screamed for years for art and music classes, because these subjects develop higher-level thinking, but were told there was no money to provide them. All of a sudden we have the money for charter schools, which will take money away from the public schools. [38]

Pro-charter narratives depict teachers as victims typically because they work in unprofessional and authoritarian school systems. In another, more charter-sympathetic, passage an author indicated that extant schools can hinder teachers in reaching their full potential:

> In schools across Alabama (even those with strong reputations) there are still students with immense potential who are struggling to hit their stride academically. Likewise, there are

still teachers who yearn for an environment where they truly can be treated as professionals. [39]

Similar to teachers, taxpayers were victims, because their money was wasted on ineffectual political actors, unions, and incompetent teachers, or because it was wasted on corrupt political actors, private interest groups, and businesses. Table 4 provides a summary list of mostly commonly listed characters.

Table 4. *Most commonly listed character types*

Heroes	Villains	Victims
Political actors (Governor, senators, presidents, legislatures)	*Teachers*	*Students*
	Teacher's Union (AEA)	*Public Schools*
Public education sector	*Political actors (Governor, senators, presidents, legislatures)*	*State of Alabama*
Teacher's Union (AEA)		*Teachers*
Advocacy or lobbying groups	*Advocacy or lobbying groups*	*Taxpayers*
Educational Management Organizations (EMOs)	*Educational Management Organizations (EMOs)*	*Local Education Agencies (LEAs)*
	Public education sector	

Conclusion

There are various avenues for future NPF studies in the education policy domain. For example, the ongoing legal disputes regarding charter schools have important implications with regards to the application of governmental immunity, labor protection, and public accountability laws to the schools and their officials across states. First, in a series of ongoing litigation in Mississippi, Florida, and District of Colombia, the constitutionality of state's charter school law in reference to funding arrangements is being disputed (Reed, 2019). Second, especially since the NAACP called for a statewide moratorium on charter school expansion in 2017, an increasing number of school districts in California have been debating and voting on such moratoriums, tighter restrictions, and elimination of for-profit charters, while a similar provision was removed from a bill in Nevada (Strauss, 2019; Tarinelli, 2019). Third, an interesting manifestation of policy variation can be observed in a number of labor struggles taking place in charter schools in states with and without collective bargaining laws for public school teachers (Cohen, 2017). While the unionization efforts of charter school teachers in California, Louisiana, and Philadelphia have been met with heavy-handed opposition, deliberate charter unionization campaigns and teacher strikes such as those recently seen in Chicago and Los Angeles have captured media attention. These are just three of numerous examples of legislative battles in which policy actors would engage in strategic use of narratives or stories to influence the policy process and its outcomes.

Our analyses based on NPF framework showed that core structural elements of policy narratives were identifiable in the editorials and op-eds reviewed, the use of narrative elements and strategies differed by endorsed policy solution, and the coverage diverged from the discussion in the nationwide charter school politics in a number of ways. The findings have implications for two lines of literature. First, our research provides some contributions to NPF scholarship. Primarily, charter school politics provides an interesting policy avenue to examine narrative elements since nationwide advocacy coalitions feature a diverse group of actors and ideologies. Similar to NPF studies in other policy domains, we were able to identify clear narrative elements in these charter school policy narratives. Analyses here suggest that similar to the composition of the advocacy coalitions (Kirst, 2007; Vergari, 2007), their policy narratives also reflect the local context and are shaped by local alliances. The news media coverage of charter schools in the recent years prior to adoption of the legislation mostly referred to the state's teachers union and, mostly Republican, policymakers as policy actors. Early discussion focused primarily on loss of potential federal grants or potential loss of public school funding to charter schools, tying the expectations to general political climate and history of the state. Concerns about the local control of school systems was a noticeable theme, though whether the charter schools would lead to degradation or generation of local control was dependent on the preconceived policy stance. There are various avenues for future NPF studies in education policy domain. Studies focusing on local contexts in the same policy domain may clarify the nature of variation in local policy stories. For example, how would the narrative elements differ in policy stories in another state considering adoption or in a state that have a longer history with charter schools? Are victims more prevalent characters in policy narratives during the policy adoption stage or in specific local policy subsystems? It would also be interesting to see future research examine whether and how these real-world policy narratives influence public opinion at the micro-level, and policy change at the meso-level.

Second, the findings would be of interest to education policy scholars, especially those interested in charter schools, politics of education, and the intersection between press and political actors and processes. The policy narratives analyzed here provided different definitions of educational problems that compete for attention and resources. However, both the straight reporting and the opinion pieces were mostly superficial and generally lacking in depth. If evidence was cited to support arguments in the articles, it was usually flimsy and not discussed in sufficient detail. There was also a lack of policing truth claims made by non-journalistic editorial writers. Perhaps this is not surprising. Examining nationwide newspaper coverage of school choice between 1980 and 2004, Henig (2008) showed that national outlets also failed to present in-depth and objective analysis of charter and school choice research. Reporter's training in education journalism or lack thereof, editorial or reporter skepticism of education research, financial troubles in journalism in general, reluctance of scholars, and influence of foundations and advocacy organizations in funding and disseminating research supportive of their policy preferences, result in an imbalanced representation of education research in the media (Henig, 2008). It is likely that these problems are exacerbated in local media outlets. Regardless, at the local context and in a novel policy domain, these newspapers' editorials still plays a central role in disseminating information to the citizenry and generating attention. As such, the politics of charter schools is an area of inquiry for future studies focused on media representation education research and policy making. For example, do local editorials and op-eds reflect the same narrative elements as other narrative sources? Is there any evidence to suggest that some researchers are more prominently featured in op-ed formats? Charter policy is now a mature subsystem in nationwide politics, and charters have shaped several policies and rules including state employment, teacher certification requirements, and collective

bargaining rules. To what extent, the policy narratives in the local media discuss political factors and predict or affect state-level laws and rules?

Finally, the missing frames in the narratives also matter. Problem definitions play a critical role in the policy process. As Portz (1996) notes, "problem definitions that are more visible, adopted by powerful political sponsors, and attached to viable solutions stand a better chance of receiving recognition and action on the policy agenda" (p.382). In other words, problems that are not articulated are more likely to be ignored. How did this coverage converge or diverge from the discussion in the nationwide charter school politics? The coverage in these narratives was dominated by local politics, negative rhetoric, and lacked some of the most prominent discussion points in nationwide charter school politics. Inadequate funding, poor teaching, or faulty governance were articulated as visible problems, with implied or direct solutions. However issues related to segregation and stratification, teacher certification and quality, and the expanding role of corporate and private interest groups in public policy making in education were for the most part missing. Investigating why these more nationally recognized aspects of charter school politics are omitted at the state and local level, as was reflected in our findings, would prove fertile ground for future research.

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Nevbahar Ertas is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Her research focuses broadly on public service, civic engagement, and education policy.

Andrew N. McKnight is an Associate Professor of Educational Foundations at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He is interested in the application of philosophical and qualitative research methods to contemporary educational and cultural issues. Mostly these concern the intersections of social/cultural theory, ethics, and current educational policy specifically as related to the emotional contexts of schooling, social and environmental ecology, and questions of equity within diverse populations.