

CONSTRUCTING EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF OBAMA'S INTERVIEW AT THE EDUCATION NATION SUMMIT 2012

Jinsol Lee
University of Pennsylvania

Keywords: educational achievement, Obama, discourse analysis

In the fall of 2012, a series of teacher union strikes in Chicago catalyzed controversial discussions in education within the political sector, as the goals for student achievement gained increasing attention. Hence, discourses as systems of representation within the particular context and time-period of the teacher union strikes in Chicago provided rich, important data for understanding the forms of power and knowledge constructed around educational achievement within the political sphere.

In this commentary, I analyze a portion of President Barack Obama's interview on NBC News, which aired during the network's 2012 Education Nation Summit (Appendix A). I frame this discussion using the four stages of the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Willig, 2008), guided by the following questions: How does the social world expressed through this language recursively shape and become shaped by different discourses of power in educational politics? Specifically, within the context and time period of the teacher union strikes, how do President Obama's constructions of educational achievement through his discourse create a meaningful version of the world in the political sphere? These questions frame the analysis for understanding how political discourse shapes our national education system.

Stage 1: Identifying the Discursive Construct

Even though its definition was not overtly stated in the selected interview excerpt, I identified *educational achievement* as a discursive object in the implicit references that occurred frequently throughout the text (Willig, 2008). For example, educational achievement is described as something shown through "performance" and "doing well" (19-20), particularly with regards to subjects such as math and science (33-36), but that it is met with "issues and problems" such as money (18, 21) and needs "reform" (21-24).

Obama also refers to educational achievement as something that "requires involvement" from different adult figures (9-13), as something to "strive toward" and which demands "our best" (12-13). Furthermore, Obama alludes to educational achievement as "results that everyone across the country wants" (8) and as something "for all kids", regardless of their socioeconomic status or background (31-33). These different references construct educational achievement as a universally desired social goal that everyone can attain through effort and collaboration. Based on these descriptions, educational achievement as a discursive object is primarily delineated by the problems that mark the lack of educational achievement and the reforms necessary to achieve it as a goal nation-wide.

Stage 2: Discourses

Obama clearly draws on *policy discourse* in the construction of educational achievement because policies typically involve enacting organizational decisions developed by governance bodies to achieve particular goals. For example, the interview text constructs educational achievement in part as an important social goal that requires reforms to overcome current problems in the context of the United States. As something to "strive toward" (12), educational achievement is hampered by "a lot of problems out there" (18), which can be resolved "through creativity and evidence-based approaches" to reform (41-44).

On the other hand, educational achievement is also constructed as a positive outcome of collaborative efforts for all children

across the nation. Obama states that “the way you get results is to get everybody involved” (9) and repeatedly uses collective terminology such as “let’s” and “we” throughout the second half of his interview. Consequently, he constructs educational achievement as a *communal discourse*—a collective process rather than merely an authoritative imposition of policies. By referencing the idea of community, Obama’s use of the communal discourse invokes the importance of combined efforts in educational achievement and provides a legitimate basis for gaining the support of all adults.

Stage 3: Action Orientation

Action orientation involves a closer examination of the discursive context (Graham, 2011) in order to determine its implications and functions within the constructions of educational achievement. The text describes educational achievement through policy discourse, indicating that it is obtainable through particular strategies, saying “there’s no doubt that we can step up our game” (33) and “reform is important” (21-22). Obama’s use of a policy-oriented discursive construction of educational achievement could be construed as a way of emphasizing hope and promise. By constructing educational achievement as an attainable goal, despite the teacher union strikes in urban areas of Chicago, Obama was able to present the audience with expectant promises and promote positivity in an uncertain situation.

Furthermore, Obama’s policy-oriented discourse also frames educational achievement as something that requires expertise and effort to obtain. He described his strong beliefs regarding how to achieve results (114) and extends numerous proposals for “moving forward” through policy actions (33-43). Obama does not claim to hold an inerrant solution for success; he says instead, “let’s figure out what works” (42), indicating that he believes that he can find answers to ameliorate the issues that hamper educational achievement. He also frames his proposals as preferable to alternatives, commenting that “this is big argument, and big difference, that I’ve got with Governor Romney in this election” (43-44). Thus, his use of policy discourse in this context functions to emphasize the strength of his methods and undermine his opponent’s perspectives during a competitive time in the presidential election.

Obama also uses a communal discourse to highlight the importance of collective efforts and benefits in attaining educational achievement and to earn the support of individuals from multiple stakeholders in different sectors. For example, in spite of the divisions engendered by the teacher union strikes in Chicago, Obama uses the universal desire for educational achievement at the beginning of the text (8-9) in order to unify the public audience, most of whom are also voters for the upcoming election. Obama declares his beliefs that both of the opposing sides of the strike, Mayor Emanuel and the teacher unions, made important points (16-18), garnering the support of all voters through communal discourse.

Stage 4: Positioning

Discourses provide the context for analyzing the positioning of subjects, in which roles are not static within interactions but instead, subjects take up dynamic positions in relations to others that explain behaviors within the context (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). Obama positioned himself both as an advocate for the good of the public who cares about a collective goal desired by people “all across the country” (8-9) and as a figure of authority for particular strategies and policies. For example, his use of “let’s” and “we” in the second half of the excerpt positions him as being aligned with the public goals and desires. As a result, the subject position offered by this construction is one of being supportive of the public good. Furthermore, in lines 33-43, Obama demonstrates himself as a figure of authority by explicating his proposals for “moving forward” and “making a difference” based on implementation of his Race to the Top policies. His positioning as an authority figure also emphasizes the fact that he is proactive in his leadership by contributing significantly to the reforms, which can earn the trust and support of the public audience.

Conclusion and Implications

The analysis reveals how Obama constructs educational achievement as an important social goal that can be attained through reforms to overcome current problems. Through his discourse, he positions himself as an advocate and as an informed authority figure. Educational achievement is shaped as a positive outcome of collaborative public efforts, in spite of the divisions and discord the teacher strikes instigated within the political sector. The discourse in this interview reveals how the language used in education shapes our society, and also reflects the power relationships between the public, the political figures, and the media.

While many other factors played a role in the presidential elections of 2012, an element of a “real effect” (Williams, 1999, p. 254)

of the power of the discourse is that Obama succeeded in gaining the majority of the votes for his second term in office through his use of policy and communal discourse in addressing educational achievement. Thus, the outcomes suggest that leaders in the United States may benefit from presenting themselves as authority figures with expertise and policy plans, while remaining aligned with the goals of the collective good and positioning themselves as a part of the community.

In light of the 2016 elections, it is important to be aware of how politicians construct various discursive objects in nuanced ways for political gains given the power of discourse in influencing the public and the national education system. As such, the 2016 presidential candidates' discussions on education-related issues offer valuable data for future analysis in further understanding the influential power of discourse in political spheres.

1. **Appendix : Data**

2. SAVANNAH GUTHRIE:

3. Well, they say all politics is local. But sometimes local politics turn national. So I want to ask
4. you about the strike in Chicago. There was a leading reform advocate who said, "This shows it
5. a new day for Democrats. They are no longer kowtowing to the unions." Is that how you see it?

6. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:

7. You know, that's not how I see it. What I see is that, all across the country, people want results.
8. And I'm a strong believer that the way you get results is to get everybody involved. So it starts at
9. home. Parents have to parent and turn off the T.V. and the video and make sure your kids are
10. doing their homework and communicate with your teachers.
11. It means teachers striving for excellence in the classroom. It means school boards making sure
12. that teachers have the resources and the creativity to do their best, principals who are leaders.
13. And I think what you saw in Chicago, for example was the fact that they had the shortest school
14. day in-- in the country, just about. And-- or the shortest school year.
15. And it was very important, I think, for Mayor Emanuel to say, "Let's step up our game." And it
16. was important for the teachers unions also to say, "Let's make sure we're not just blaming
17. teachers for a lot of big problems out there. Let's make sure we've got the resources."
18. So I'm glad it was resolved. Ultimately, the most important thing, obviously, is performance and--
19. - and making sure these kids are doing well. But I do think that from the perspective of
20. Democrats we can't just sit on the status quo or say that money's the only issue. Reform is
21. important, also. And that's been sort of the-- the benchmark we've used in my administration, is
22. to say, "We're going to give more money to those schools that are serious about reform but we're
23. not going to let people make excuses and suggest that it's just a money problem."

24. SAVANNAH GUTHRIE:

25. Why aren't we getting our money's worth? People are probably wondering, "What are we
26. spending our money on, then?"

27. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:

28. Well you know, part of the problem we've got is we've got a very diverse country. Compared to
29. some-- these smaller countries, where all the kids are coming to school pretty well prepared,
30. they're not hungry, they're not poor-- in our country, we-- you know, we've got poor kids and
31. we've-- some kids who have deep troubles at home. And-- and that affects performance.
32. But there's no doubt that we can step up our game. So what I've proposed, moving forward,
33. building off of Race To the Top, is let's hire 100,000 new math and science teachers who are
34. actually trained and math and science, as opposed to just being thrown into the classroom
35. without the kind of preparation they need.
36. Let's continue to focus on early childhood education, makes a big difference-- particularly for
37. kids who are low income. Part of our Race To the Top is let's figure out what are the drop out
38. factories out there, the-- the-- couple of thousand schools where we know they're really under-
39. performing. And let's transform those schools.
40. And-- and in all these situations, what we have to do is combine creativity and evidence-based
41. approaches. So let's not use ideology, let's figure out what works, and figure out how we scale it

42. up. And let's combine that with resources. And-- and this is big argument, and big difference,
43. that I've got with Governor Romney in this election.

Jinsol Lee is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Development program at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. She holds a master's degree in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

References:

Graham, L. J. (2011). The product of text and 'other' statements: Discourse analysis and the

critical use of Foucault. *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 43(6), 663-674. doi:10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00698.x

Harré, R. & Van Langenhove, L. (1991). Varieties of positioning. *Journal for the theory of social behavior*, 21(4) 393-407.

Williams, G. (1999). *French discourse analysis: The method of post-structuralism*. New York: Routledge.

Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Copyright 2017 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <http://urbanedjournal.org/volume-13-issue-2-winter-2016-17/constructing-educational-achievement-political-discourse-analysis>