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Presidential Rhetoric and the Purpose of American Education

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Abstract

This study examines how U.S. presidents have defined the purpose of education. Presidential rhetoric about education in inaugural and State of the Union speeches was collected and examined. Throughout history, two purposes of education have gained the most attention—civic responsibility and economic efficiency—with emphasis shifting from civic responsibility to economic efficiency over time.

The purpose of education in America has been discussed and debated for decades. Economic efficiency, social equality, democratic citizenship, self-actualization, and many other purposes have been bandied about in debates over the intent of schooling. Though proponents lobbied for one purpose over another, scholars such as Kaestle (2000) believed that education served multiple purposes, with only minor shifts over time.

Some people struck a more negative posture about education's purpose, such as those who believed schools suffered from a clarity of purpose (Novak 2002; Postman 1995). Others pointed to an unbalanced state in which the economic purpose superseded all others (Proefriedt 2001). Giroux (1988, 18) concluded, "Educational reform has become synonymous with turning schools into 'company stores' and defining school life primarily in terms that measure their utility against their contribution to economic growth and cultural uniformity."

Though the debate continues in education circles, scholars too often ignore that education's purpose is being defined simultaneously by those outside the educational arena (McDonnell and Weatherford 2000). These individuals and groups sometimes have as much or more influence over the definition of education than those

inside education—particularly as of late. These individuals include governors, state legislators, members of Congress, and U.S. presidents.

We know how scholars past and present defined education’s purpose (e.g., Barber 1992; Conant 1959; Giroux 1988; Goodlad 1994; Gutmann 1999; Mourad 2001; Whitehead 1967), but little consideration has been given to how policy makers defined American education or the requisite consequences. As Moses (2002) concluded, philosophical positions drive educational policy making, which means what policy makers believe about education’s purpose should be important to educational scholars.

This paper examines how U.S. presidents have defined education. Through content analysis of inaugural and State of the Union (SOU) speeches, results showed that throughout our nation’s history two purposes have gained the most attention, and emphasis given to these purposes has shifted. The implications likely mean more initiatives focused on training the future workforce and fewer efforts dedicated to preparing future citizens.

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Literature Review

Scholarship examining how policy makers defined the purpose of education appears slim when compared to the vast literature generated by academics. Moreover, most of the research on policy makers and educational purpose focuses on 18th and 19th century leaders. Scholars who have examined the articulation of educational purpose through policy documents or policy makers’ rhetoric noted diverse and multitudinous purposes (Willis 1961).

Two purposes, however, have garnered the most attention among policy makers—citizenship and economics—with emphases on these beginning as early as the 18th and 19th centuries (Kaestle 1983, 2000; Pangle and Pangle 2000; Tyack and James 1986). The founding fathers who wrote on education primarily focused on preparation for citizenry and economic stability. They stressed an education in English, political and economic history, writing, rhetoric, drawing, arithmetic, and science. Tyack and James (1986) also highlighted educational purposes supported through the congressional ordinances of 1785 and 1787 that set the terms for land grants to states. For example, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (Thorpe 1909, 961) included, “Reli-

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gion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools, and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

To avail themselves of the land grants, many leaders crafted constitutions that provided for education and specified the purposes of schooling in their respective states. Of the 40 states that wrote constitutions during the 19th century (White 1950), 22 articulated purposes for education. In these statements, one consensus was clear—the writers saw an ideological connection between an educated citizenry and the success of republican government. For example, Indiana’s 1816 constitution (White 1950, 22) stated, “To encourage intellectual, scientific [sic], and agricultural improvements by allowing rewards and immunities for the promotion and improvements of arts, sciences, commerce, manufacture, and natural history and to counsel and encourage the principles of humanity, honesty, industry, and morality.”

According to Kaestle (2000), policy makers in the 20th century continued to emphasize the dual purposes of citizenship and economics. For example, with the rise of industrialism in the United States, calls for vocationalism continued, and in light of the waves of immigrants entering the country, education meant preparation for both citizenship and industrial life. In the 1960s, leaders wielded education as a weapon in another economic battle—the war on poverty. Then, with the economic turmoil of the 1970s and early 1980s, policy makers reasoned that America needed to work smarter and more productively, casting another economic role for education.

The 1990s saw a shift in the manner of work, and leaders constructed a central role for education in the knowledge economy.

Philosophical positions drive educational policy making, which means what policy makers believe about education’s purpose should be important to educational scholars.

The Role of Presidents

The literature specifically on U.S. presidents and educational purpose is limited. Though some of the aforementioned authors did include presidents in their examinations of how policy makers defined the purpose of education, the country’s leaders only played a minor role, such as in Pangle and Pangle’s (2000) look at the founding fathers’ concept of education.

Research on a president’s role in educational policy making, with collateral discussions on belief systems of education’s purpose, are more common. Examples include research on Presidents Jefferson (Wagoner 1976), Eisenhower (Chambers 1985),

Lyndon Johnson (Tevis 1981–1982), Reagan (Beard 1984), and Clinton (Carlin 1997). Related research includes studies of multiple administrations' policy making, such as Berube's (1991) longitudinal survey of presidents and education or Thomas's (1967) collection of presidential inaugural and SOU statements. The latter included a brief history of presidential involvement in education, but none of these works specifically analyzed presidential educational philosophies.

Only Fowler (1995), in reviewing former President Clinton's speeches, analyzed the values or purposes inherent in a president's educational policy making. Fowler's content analysis (1995, 274) suggested that Clinton saw the purpose of education as economic growth and "fraternity," the latter defined as "the recognition of a common bond producing a sense of unity, community, and nationhood." Fowler's (1995) research not only examined Clinton's educational values, but also aligned them with policies developed by the Clinton administration, thereby demonstrating the prescient capability of analyzing a president's value system in relation to a policy area.

The research used in this study applies and expands Fowler's (1995) ideas and approach to all presidents, beginning with George Washington and ending with the sitting president. However, the longitudinal nature of this study, the number of years spanned, and the availability of data sources required methodological differences.

Questions

In examining how U.S. presidents defined education throughout history, answers to the following questions were sought:

- How have U.S. Presidents defined the purpose of education in the United States?
- Which purposes, if any, have been given greater emphasis?
- Are any shifts in emphasis evident in how presidents define education's purpose?
- What does the enthymematic nature of public rhetoric tell us about the greater community's view of education's purpose?

Data

Data came from presidential inaugural addresses (IA) and SOU speeches beginning with George Washington and ending with George W. Bush. The use of speeches as indicators of presidential leadership and national consensus is based on the theory that presidents, as nationally elected leaders, play a central role in the life of the country (Hart 1987). They set a tone and direction through rhetoric, attempt to implement that direction through proposed legislation, and oversee the implementation through an executive bureaucracy.

Scholars believed the rhetorical component of leadership was key (Muir 1988). Hart (1987, 46) explained, "No act of leading can be accomplished without an act of speaking." The "bully pulpit" is a president's opportunity to shape and inform the public debate. Hart (1987, 14) added, "Public speech no longer attends the process of governance—it is governance." Such a notion grew out of the belief that government is about ideas (Soder 2001) and their manifestations as words (Gelderman 1997).

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Rhetorical leadership, however, is not a one-way exercise. It is communication between the president and the people, and the adjusting of ideas to people and people to ideas (Denton and Hahn 1986). Presidents do not unilaterally move the public in directions the people oppose. Presidents often sense prevailing opinions and craft policies within that ethos (Seligman and Covington 1996). Though it may appear that presidents lead millions, the relationship is reciprocal. Such a dynamic makes the study of rhetoric fruitful given its reflection of both the leader and greater community. This means presidential rhetoric about education's purpose reflects not only the belief of the president but also the prevailing psyche of the country.

Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses

These two speeches constitute the most significant instances of presidential rhetoric from which one can reliably infer a macroscopic story (Lim 2002). The IA represents the first time the president speaks to the country as president, and the SOU address stands as the only presidential speech prescribed by the Constitution. In the IA, the president outlines his vision, priorities, and values. The SOU address is the most important speech in the year, combining policy, politics, and publicity to focus on the president's agenda (Kumar 2001).

Moreover, these addresses represent presidential communications in which significant change over time is not expected. The patterns and purposes of these speeches make them ideal sources in trend analysis because any change in values indicates an actual change, not one resulting from the speech itself (Lim 2002). The number of years covered also strengthens conclusions about change in educational purpose over time. An examination of changes over multiple centuries sieves out short-term variations due to different governing ideologies or presidential personalities, making it easier to identify persistent shifts across time (Lim 2002).

Analysis

The analytic method used was content analysis, which allows a researcher to transform nonquantitative documents into quantitative form. Content analysis involves the construction of categories within which particular units of analysis—paragraphs, sentences, or words—are tallied and placed (Holsti 1969).

Consistent with content analysis procedures defined by Neuendorf (2002), sections of all the speeches that addressed education were collected. From these orations, sections in which presidents defined a purpose or purposes for education were identified. This exercise resulted in a sample of 29 presidents and passages from 72 speeches. Educational purposes were coded and counted at the phrase level. Descriptive data indicated how often each purpose was discussed. This process is based on the theory that if someone talks more about a certain value, he or she is more concerned with it (Namenwirth and Lasswell 1970).

Neuendorf (2002) and others (Holsti 1969) recommended a procedure that combines inductive and deductive methods. With the inductive method, phrases were coded with no predetermined categories. Instead, phrases were examined and purposes defined

within their contexts. This avoids the “fallacy of presentism” (Fischer 1970, 135), or when “the antecedent in a narrative series is falsified by being defined or interpreted in terms of the consequent.”

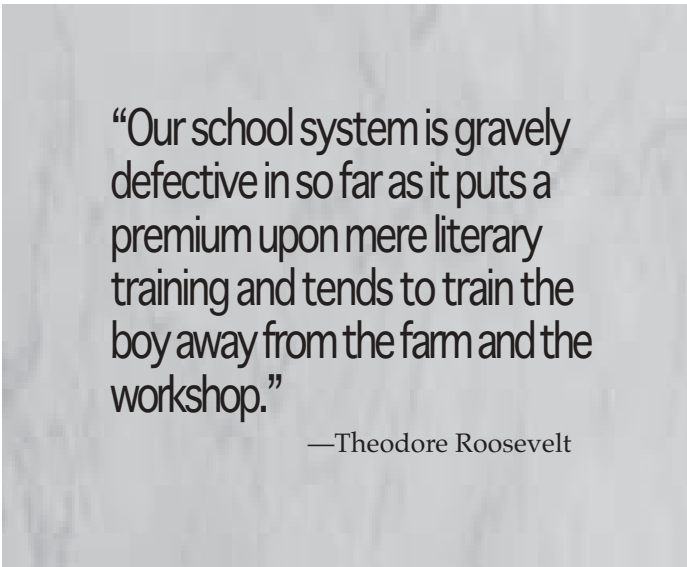
To complete the quantitative, longitudinal phase, the deductive approach required constructing a standard index using the inductive codes. The basic process condensed multiple classifications with similar meanings into fewer content categories (Neuendorf 2002). This resulted in four discrete divisions: self-realization, human relationship, economic efficiency, and civic responsibility.

Self-Realization

To fulfill this purpose, educators strive to develop each individual’s abilities, curiosity, and creativity. Such efforts contribute to the individual’s development of self and to her or his place in the community (Beane 1998). The relationship is circular—self-realization equips one to function socially, politically, and economically which, in turn, builds a greater sense of self (Hartoonian 1999).

Human Relationship

In fulfilling this purpose, schooling seeks to resolve the tensions between individual freedom and social equality. Through respect for justice, an awareness of the balance between social ideals, and acknowledgment of our commonality in the human condition, we better understand and act upon the human relationship purpose. Dewey (1927, 147–151) defined it as, “The clear consciousness of communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the ideal of democracy. . . . Fraternity, liberty, and equality isolated from community life are hopeless abstractions.”



“Our school system is gravely defective in so far as it puts a premium upon mere literary training and tends to train the boy away from the farm and the workshop.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

Economic Efficiency

Throughout America’s history, schools have promoted the prevailing economic virtue—capitalism. Yet, capitalism is more than a system of economy. It is a philosophical system involving ideas about human nature, natural law, and character and values (Wingo 1965). According to capitalistic doctrine, competition is the life of trade; so competition also is the basic motive for human behavior. Recognizing that free market cannot function or functions badly without education (Engel 2000), some asserted that economic purpose has become prominent in schooling (Novak 2002; Rury 2002).

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Civic Responsibility

Wingo (1965), Engel (2000), and Labaree (1997) defined civic responsibility as preparing students for their role as citizen-leaders. Because civic responsibility connotes the ability to affect the future and nature of community, it requires a citizenry of quality and character (Antczak 1985), which requires deliberate instruction (Barber 1992; 1997). Gutmann (1999) identified the development of democratic and civic character as a fundamentally moral enterprise, since democracy is not license but responsibility to community and humanity.

Results

Throughout the nation's history, presidents overwhelmingly have defined education's purpose in terms of civic responsibility and economic efficiency (Table 1).

Beginning with the very first president, our country's leaders have defined education in civic terms. Washington (Richardson 1911, 194), who spoke of the assimilation of democratic principles through education in his 1796 SOU address, stated, "The more homogenous our citizens can be made in these particulars, the greater will be our prospect of permanent union." Monroe (Richardson 1911, 576) likewise proposed in his 1817 IA, "Let us by all wise and constitutional measures promote intelligence among the people as the best means of preserving our liberties."

Garfield (Richardson 1911, 4599) echoed a similar sentiment in 1881:

The voters of the Union, who make and unmake constitutions, and upon whose will hang the destinies of our governments, can transmit their supreme authority to no successors save the coming generation of voters, who are the sole heirs of sovereign power. If that generation comes to its inheritance blinded by ignorance . . . the fall of the Republic will be certain and remediless.

Hoover (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1930, 6) continued the theme in 1929, "Self-government can succeed only through an instructed electorate." In 1955, Eisenhower (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1956, 24–25) concluded, "[T]he education of all our citizens is therefore imperative to the maintenance and invigoration of America's free institutions."

The economic purpose of education was referenced in early administrations, with phrases such as "national prosperity" in Washington's 1796 SOU address (Richardson 1911, 194) and Grant's (Richardson 1911, 4207) 1873 statement, "The evidently increasing interest in the cause of education is a most encouraging feature in the . . . prosperity of the country." By 1907, however, Theodore Roosevelt (Richardson 1911, 1741) discussed it more pointedly, "Our school system is gravely defective in so far as it puts a premium upon mere literary training and tends to train the boy away from the farm and the workshop."

Franklin Roosevelt (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1945, Item 4) in his 1944 SOU address spoke of a "second bill of rights" to establish universal pros-

Table 1: Frequencies of Education’s Purposes Articulated by Presidents, 1790–2002

President	Self-Realization	Human Relationship	Economy Efficiency	Civic Responsibility
Washington	1		1	6
J. Adams	1			1
Jefferson				2
Madison		1		6
Monroe				2
J. Q. Adams				1
Grant		1	2	7
Hayes		1		6
Garfield				1
Arthur				1
Cleveland				5
Harrison				2
McKinley				2
T. Roosevelt			3	1
Taft			1	
Wilson			1	
Harding				3
Hoover				1
F. Roosevelt			3	1
Truman	1	1	3	4
Eisenhower		1	1	4
Kennedy			2	4
L. Johnson	2	1	3	1
Nixon			3	
Carter		1	6	2
Reagan	1		5	
George H. Bush			1	
Clinton	2	1	12	1
George W. Bush	1		1	
Totals	9	8	48	64

perity: "Among these are . . . the right to a good education." Reagan (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1984, 106) stated in his 1983 SOU address, "We Americans are still the technological leaders in most fields. We must keep that edge, and to do so we need to begin renewing the basics—starting with our educational system." Clinton (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 2000, 65) likewise opined, "[E]ducation must provide the knowledge and nurture the creativity that will allow our entire Nation to thrive in the new economy."

"The chance to learn is their brightest hope and must command our full determination. For learning brings skills; and skills bring jobs; and jobs bring responsibility and dignity, as well as taxes."

—Lyndon Johnson

The self-realization purpose saw scant attention and was mentioned in general terms. For example, Grant (Richardson 1911, 4066), in his 1870 SOU address intoned, "The subjects of education and agriculture are of great interest to the success of . . . happiness." Lyndon Johnson (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1966, 72), in his 1965 IA, was only slightly more specific, "We must work to provide the knowledge and the surroundings which can enlarge the possibilities of every citizen." Though George W. Bush (Weekly Compilation of Presi-

dential Documents 2001, 209) mentioned self-realization in his first IA, he too spoke only in generalities. He said, "The ambitions of some Americans are limited by failing schools and hidden prejudice and the circumstances of their birth."

Finally, human relationships have received the least presidential attention. Madison (Richardson 1911, 470), during his 1810 SOU address, called for schooling for "social harmony." In 1880, Hayes (Richardson 1911, 455) equated education with "social order." By the middle of the last century, both Truman and Johnson spoke of education for social equality.

Shifts in Educational Purpose

Self-realization and human relationship purposes played an insignificant role in presidential rhetoric about education as Table 1 illustrates. Though the frequency of rhetoric on both subjects increased during the 20th century, it would be difficult to discuss conclusively a shift involving either given such infrequent attention. A clear shift is evident, however, in how presidents defined the purpose of education in America in civic and economic terms. From 1790 to 1900, presidents mentioned civic responsibility in relation to education 42 times while mentioning economic purposes only three. From 1900 to 2001, presidents defined education by civic responsibility 22 times and by economic efficiency 45 times.

Discussion and Conclusion

The fact that earlier presidents expressed an interest in education for civic responsibility is logical. As Kaestle (2000) observed, the 18th and 19th centuries saw the creation of a nation, civil war after which animosity and distrust lingered, and waves of immigration. Educating youngsters in civic responsibility, therefore, transcended patriotic platitudes; it was an important piece in preserving the Union. Somewhat surprising, however, is how little attention presidents paid to the economic purpose of education from 1790 to 1900. Only Presidents Washington and Grant mentioned national prosperity in relation to education.

This is particularly peculiar given de Tocqueville's (1900, 37–38) 1840 observation:

Their strictly Puritanical origin—their exclusively commercial habits—even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts . . . have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects. His passions, his wants, his education, and everything about him seem to unite in drawing the native of the United States earthward.

Thus, one might have expected presidents (Wingo 1965) and by extension the general population to define education by its “earthward” purpose, particularly given the prevalent Puritan or Protestant work ethic. Yet, this was not the case in rhetoric of the time.

Though presidents prior to 1900 rarely articulated an economic purpose for education, subsequent presidents clearly have. For example, Clinton led all 20th century presidents with 12 statements, more than double the number of statements made by Ronald Reagan, the country's other economics-focused president. Twentieth century presidents also linked policy to rhetoric, such as Clinton's School-to-Work legislation (Fowler 1995). Though scholars such as Kaestle (2000) downplayed the notion of such a shift and pointed to the inextricable relationship between civic and economic considerations, the data presented herein contradicts that belief.

Given the implicit nature of public rhetoric, it appears we, as a people, have laid aside an interest in educating tomorrow's citizen-leaders for their civic responsibility and were never that interested in education for self-realization or human relationship.

Throughout our nation's history two purposes have gained the most attention—civic responsibility and economic efficiency—and emphasis given to these purposes has shifted.

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The emphasis on economic efficiency over other purposes carries with it several important implications. First, as Fowler (1995) and others (Jackson and Kingdon 1992; McDonnell 1991) illustrated, leaders pursue policies based on the value systems specific to certain issues, meaning policies such as standards and assessment, accountability, and choice systems likely will continue to receive attention given current economic definitions of education.

Second, educational goals, other than economic, likely will remain marginalized. In 20th century IAs and SOU speeches, presidents promoted educational programs and policies to meet economic ends, but only a few introduced initiatives related to civic responsibility. Examples of the former included:

- Lyndon Johnson (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1967, 3):
“The chance to learn is their brightest hope and must command our full determination. For learning brings skills; and skills bring jobs; and jobs bring responsibility and dignity, as well as taxes.”
- Jimmy Carter (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1981, 2936):
“As a result, a \$2 billion youth education and jobs initiative was introduced to provide unemployed youth with the basic education and work experience they need to compete in the labor market of the 1980s.”

Third, the de-emphasis of noneconomic purposes carries with it the potential of perpetuating a citizenry committed to self above all, shrugging off responsibilities inherent in a free society. Considering the breakdown of social capital (Putnam 2000), the disengagement of youth (Chideya 1997), students’ lackluster knowledge of civics (Manzo 2001), and endemic voter apathy (Piven and Cloward 2000), such a dynamic may be in contemporary evidence.

Finally, the definitions presidents attach to education question the greater public’s commitment to preparing citizen-leaders for more than economic pursuits. Yet, it was not always so. In the first volume of *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville (1900, 322–23) observed the dynamic he considered central to the strength of our republic:

It cannot be doubted that, in the United States, the instruction of the people powerfully contributes to the support of a democratic republic; and such must always be the case, I believe, where instruction which awakens the understanding is not separated from moral education which amends the heart.

Today, when we define education principally in economic terms, as reflected in presidential rhetoric, and act accordingly with policies and programs, we appear content to teach our children to prize only shallow pursuits that produce flat, self-indulgent souls and then “wonder at the licentiousness of our times” (Novak 2002, 612).

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