

Mar 26th, 12:50 PM - 2:20 PM

Discourse and the Logic of Education Reform: A Cultivated Narrative of Crisis in Media Reporting in Kansas

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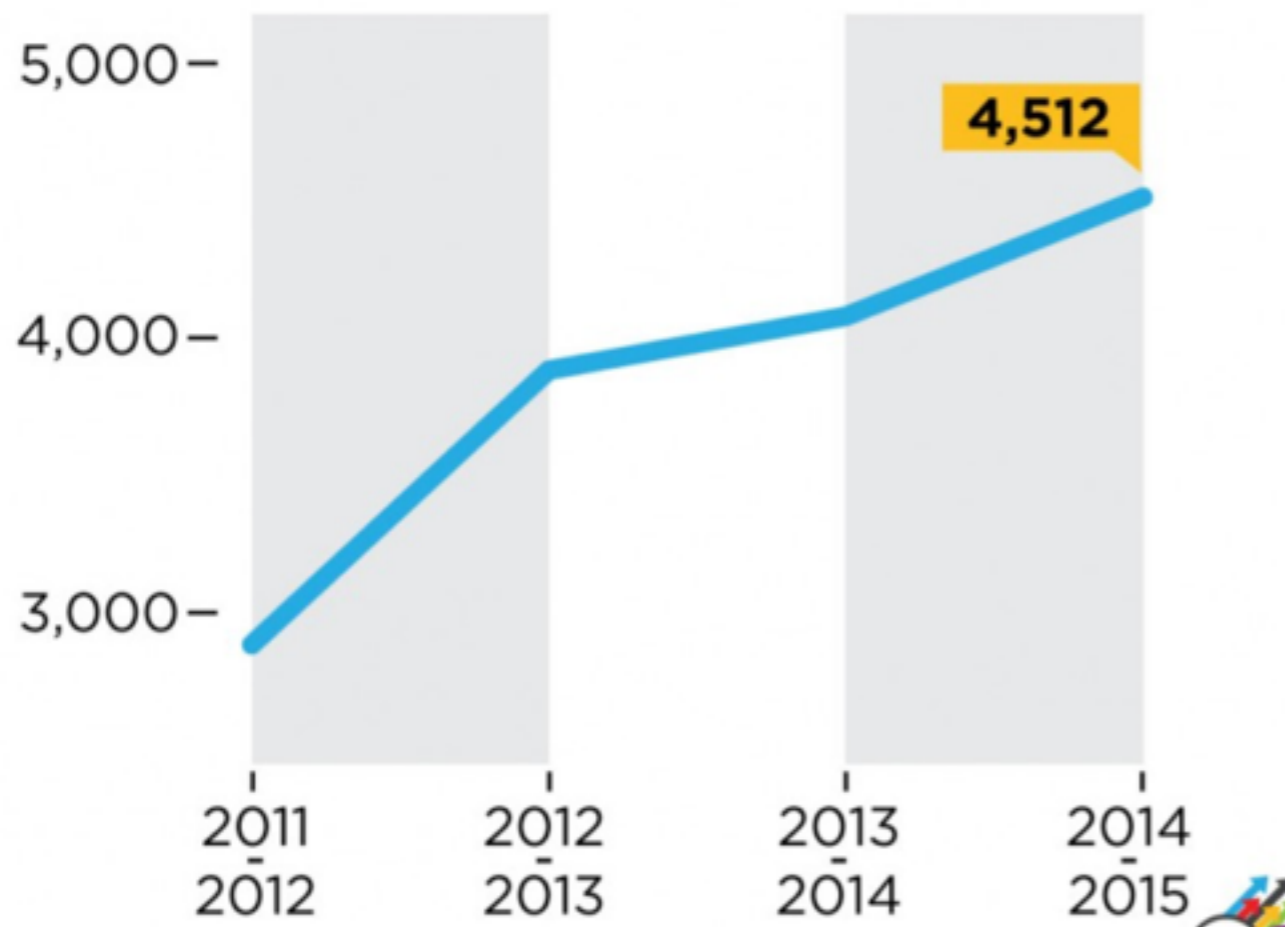
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Recommended Citation

Kerr, Jessica P., "Discourse and the Logic of Education Reform: A Cultivated Narrative of Crisis in Media Reporting in Kansas" (2016). *International Critical Media Literacy Conference*. 2.
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KANSAS TEACHER DEPARTURES



Source: Kansas State Board Of Education



Discourse and the Logic of Education Reform: Crisis Narratives in Kansas

Critical Media Literacy, March 2016

Jessica Preston Kerr, Kansas State University

Images, clockwise from top, (41 Action News, 2015b, 41 Action News, 2015a & Breiner, 2015)

"For any system of thought to become dominant, it requires the articulation of fundamental concepts that become so deeply embedded in commonsense understandings that they are taken for granted and beyond question. For this to occur, not any old concepts will do. A conceptual apparatus has to be constructed that appeals almost naturally to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities that seem to inhere in the social world we inhabit."

– David Harvey, Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction

Situating the Discursive 'Problematization' of Education Within a Larger Geo-Spatial Conversation

Questions as a Former CPS Teacher/Activist and Motivation for Inquiry



(Michie, 2015)

Chicago teachers contesting the neoliberal rationality of school privatization and marketization proffered as state fiscal crisis



(King, 2015)

Education 2.0: The Brownback Laboratory



What's the Matter with Kansas?

- ❖ Fiscal changes to State education funding formula
- ❖ State teacher shortage
- ❖ Elimination of teacher collective bargaining rights and erosion of teachers licensure requirements

(Szabo, 2015)

“I find it increasingly difficult to convince young people that education is a profession worth considering, and I have some veterans who think about leaving. In the next three years I think we’ll have maybe the worst teacher shortage in the country -- I think most of that is self-inflicted.”

-Tim Hallacy, Superintendent of Silver Lake Schools

(Klein, 2015)

Q: How does the State/Media Discursively 'Problematize' Education in the State of Kansas?

Data Sources for the Study

Topeka Capital Journal, January, 2014 - January, 2016

Office of the Governor State Press Releases, 2014-2016

Gov. Brownback's State of the State Address, 2014, 2015, 2016

Gov. Brownback's 'Road Map 2.0' document

Education Discourse of Crisis

❖ Gubernatorial Sources

The State's discursive construction of crisis embodies classic neoliberal tropes of free-market logic, namely the inefficiency of public/state funded institutions (e.g. crisis via the inability of the welfare state to "advance the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007).

- ❖ **"Kansas state government was flat broke.** We had begun the fiscal year with \$876.05 in the bank. **The state couldn't even pay its own bills. Everyone** from school districts to service vendors **was suffering"** (Brownback, 2014).
- ❖ **"The government was not serving the people.** Unfortunately, it was the other way around. We had two big challenges--get people working again and **restore fiscal discipline.** We took action, breaking from the failed policies in the past... We developed an action plan. We streamlined regulations, reformed workers' compensation and went from the second highest tax burden in our region to the second lowest" (Brownback, 2014).
- ❖ **"One of the ironies, though, of our age is that government has become omnipresent, yet the people have never felt more distant from it. Too many decision are made by unaccountable, opaque institutions"** (Brownback, 2015)

- ❖ "Education is not done by money or buildings. It is done by teachers. Teaching isn't a job or a vocation. It's a calling... Teachers need money to care for their needs. That's why **Kansans invest in education: so good teachers are able to do their calling** and teach. Yet today, **of the more than \$4 billion the state puts into education funding, not nearly enough goes toward instruction. That's highly inefficient if not immoral, denying Kansans from putting their education dollars where they want it...** behind a good teachers. I call on the legislature to **design a new education funding system** that puts more of our money into instruction. That provides bonuses for exceptional teachers and recognizes their true value **to our future and the souls of our students**" (Brownback, 2016).

Education Discourse of Crisis

❖ Topeka Capital Journal Reporting

While media sources discursively construct educational crisis critically in relation to the State's position, the media narrative utilizes crisis rhetoric in the production of "political spectacle" (Anderson, 2007), one, not outside the purview of neoliberal rationality.

Discussion of the fiscal changes to the State's education funding policy, the state teacher shortage, the elimination of teacher's collective bargaining rights, and the freeing up teachers licensure laws functions within the problematized educational institution.

- ❖ **"It's a mess. We're in perpetual budget crisis. It's not a rosy picture long term... all of the easy decisions have been made... We're going to have to make some tough decisions moving forward"** (Wilke, 2015)
- ❖ **Hiring quality teachers is one of the most important tasks for any school. But reports of districts unable to find the staff they need are common, and in Kansas, those affected often are remote or rural districts. At Garden City Unified School District 457, the shortage of in-state job candidates costs taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars a year"** (Llopis-Jepsen, 2015b).
- ❖ **" Many eliminated jobs, cut classroom budgets for teachers to buy supplies and discontinued all or almost all of their field trips, unless paid for by parent teacher organizations. Some asked parents to supply office paper and cleaning supplies for the school and their offices. Topeka shed scores of veteran teachers, offering the early retirement. Wichita closed an alternative school and dropped the number of police officers in its schools. Santa Fe restructured its buildings, dropping its community school model in favor of bussing more children farther from home. Baldwin City closed outlying rural schools"** Llopis-Jepsen, 2015a).

Analysis: Crisis/Recovery as the Logic of Neoliberalism in Education Reform

Slater's (2015) framework of recovery:

"Recovery is a simultaneously discursive and material force that is fundamentally implicated in the educational production of subjectivity and the enclosures of visions of social futures outside or beyond neoliberalism"

Apt framework because instead of an exclusive focus on "destruction" and problematization, it "incorporates the ideological and discursive; the material and subject form" into our tool kit for understanding crisis

In both data sources, the State conception and media depiction, crisis crafts a social ontology which "subsumes the ontological, like time, space, possibility, and experience within neoliberal society."

New Social Imaginaries: Implications for Education in an Era of Neoliberal Logic

- ❖ 'Crises' in education necessitate a larger understanding of the historical, political, spatial, and discursive modes of neoliberal rationality
- ❖ Because the "machinations of neoliberal reforms are shifting/contingent" (Slater, 2015), those working to resist the way we have "come to know" education in this new era must seek to uncover the ways in which material/discursive practice shape this cycle of "crisis-accumulation/recovery-crisis" (Slater, 2015) and posit a counter narrative that works outside this logic.



(Rhee, 2014)

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