

A Large-Scale Analysis of the Purpose of School in the Era of NCLB

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Abstract

Anecdotal evidence suggests that US high schools have narrowed their mission as a result of the federal NCLB Act. To date, however, representative, empirical evidence to support this claim has been lacking. The current study examined how the mission statements of a truly representative sample of 50 Massachusetts high schools changed from 2001 to 2006. The findings revealed that schools showed a statistically significant increase in the number of themes they endorsed overall as well as a shift in emphasis from civic development to cognitive development over this 5 year period. Thus, rather than focusing their missions more narrowly, schools are being called upon to do more for students without simultaneously sacrificing other important dimensions of schooling. In a second study, we analyzed a truly representative sample of 500 secondary school mission statements from a total of 10 geographically and politically diverse states. The results showed systematic differences in school mission by state that serve to validate the use of the mission statement as a tool for gaining insight into local values. In addition, the results revealed that urban schools and schools classified as failing on NCLB listed significantly more conceptual themes in their mission statements than did their counterpart schools, supporting the common argument that urban schools are often asked to take responsibility for inculcating a wider range of skills, abilities, and values in their students and suggesting that those schools classified as failing by NCLB criteria may be trying to accomplish a broader set of aims beyond mere cognitive development of students.

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Introduction

What is the purpose of school in American society? Although most citizens have a “common sense” answer to this question, systematic investigation has revealed that there is no clear consensus. At different points in time and in different places, various constituent groups (e.g., parents, businesses, politicians) have looked to schools to develop different sets of skills in students. Given the diversity of agendas associated with various stakeholders, it is perhaps not surprising that the answer to the question of the purpose of schooling depends on who and when one asks. However, such a finding is troublesome from a policy perspective because without a clear understanding of the overarching goals, aims, and mission of public schooling in the United States, it is unclear how can federal policy makers enact effective policies designed to advance and support education.

Although philosophers of education and educational historians have long debated the primary purposes of schooling, few scholars have collected empirical data on what schools themselves say about their perceived purpose. Thus, the aim of the current study was to systematically analyze a random sample of high school mission statements throughout the U.S. in order to gain a perspective on the purpose of schooling that represents the viewpoints of the educational institutions themselves.

Historical trends in the purpose of schooling

Because the U.S. constitution makes no explicit mention of education, the task of schooling falls to each state. Historically, public schools have been called upon to serve a number of different functions since their colonial inception (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995; Goodlad *et al.*, 1997; Tyack, 1988). For example, in the 1830s, the inculcation of morality and

character development dominated over subject matter in textbooks and teacher lesson plans (Tanner & Tanner, 1990). By the 1880s, however, the primary purpose of schooling had shifted toward an emphasis on cognitive development. The prime objective of education in this era was to prepare future leaders and to, "...weed out those unable to profit from a curriculum aimed at developing intellectual power." (Tanner & Tanner, 1990, p. 106). This purpose was also tied to the need to develop future leaders and good citizens. Furthermore, with the massive influx of new immigrants to America, schools were used to ensure that all citizens would share a common heritage and understand their civic rights and responsibilities (Tyack, 1988).

More recently, in the 1980s, as the number of double-income families and single-parent families increased, parents looked to schools to help foster students' social and emotional development (Elias *et al.*, 2002). In the 1990s, the explosion of information technology led schools to emphasize the concept of global citizenship. The early 21st century has brought with it, via the accountability movement, an emphasis on the academic or cognitive component of schooling.

Despite the long tradition of local control of schools, the federal government has recently exerted tremendous influence over schools through the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Currently, schools that accept federal funds are bound by NCLB to require mandatory achievement testing in mathematics, science, and language arts for all students in grades 3-12. Although there is anecdotal evidence that schools have been narrowing their focus to meet the demands of the accountability system set in place by NCLB, to our knowledge, the field currently lacks representative empirical evidence to support this claim.

Using school mission statements as an empirical tool

The school mission statement represents an excellent empirical tool for the educational researcher interested in studying the purpose of school. Several scholars have demonstrated that mission statements can be reliably coded (Bebell & Stemler, 2004; Berleur & Harvanek, 1997; Stemler & Bebell, 1999; Stober, 1997). Stemler & Bebell (1999) have developed a coding scheme for school mission statements, using emergent analytic coding, that allows mission statements to be classified into ten major thematic categories (e.g., social development, cognitive development, emotional development, civic development, physical development) as well as 33 specific subcategories. Across a series of studies, the authors found their rating system exhibited median consensus estimates of interrater reliability ranging from .77 to .80 (Bebell & Stemler, 2004; Stemler & Bebell, 1999).

School mission statements represent a useful tool for gaining access to the “school perspective” on the purpose of schooling for three reasons. First, a mission statement is one of the few written documents outlining purpose that nearly all schools have and thus fosters systematic comparison across diverse institutions. Most major accrediting bodies require a mission statement from schools seeking accreditation (AdvanceEd, 2006). Indeed, the very first standard articulated by the nation’s largest secondary school accreditation body requires that,

Schools establish and communicate a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the school. In fulfillment of the standard, the school: (i) establishes a vision for the school in collaboration with its key stakeholders, (ii) communicates the vision and purpose to build stakeholder understanding and support, (iii) identifies goals to advance the vision, (iv) ensures that the school’s vision and purpose guide the learning process, and (v) reviews its vision and purpose systematically and revises them when appropriate.” (p. 9).

Second, mission statements represent concise statements communicating broad themes that are of import to schools. Third, research from the field of school effectiveness has consistently shown that one of the common ingredients successful schools share is commitment to a shared mission (Renihan *et al.*, 1986; Rutter & Maughan, 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Although we would not argue that the mission is the only indicator of school's cultural values, we argue that it is at least one important indicator.

Research Questions

The present investigation was guided by the following specific research questions:

1. Do public high schools in the U.S. currently exhibit broad or narrow mission statements?
2. Is there general agreement across U.S. public high schools with regard to what they are stating as their primary purpose?
3. Does the content of a high school mission statement systematically differ depending upon such demographic variables as: (a) the geographic location of the school, or (b) the urbanicity of the school, or (c) the school's NCLB classification (i.e., passing/failing)?
4. Have public high school mission statements in Massachusetts become narrower in the five years since the passage of the federal NCLB legislation?

Methods

In order to examine our research questions, we conducted two studies. Study 1 will address the first three research questions via a large-scale, cross-sectional analysis. Study 2 will address the fourth research question regarding changes in mission statements over time.

Study 1: Large-Scale Comparative Analysis

Purpose

The goal of Study 1 was to: (a) provide descriptive statistics on the number of different themes present, on average, in a random sample of 50 public high school mission statements in each of 10 states, (b) provide descriptive statistics regarding the dominant theme expressed by each state's school mission statements, and (c) allow for a comparison of the frequency and nature of themes present across geographically diverse parts of the country. Given the varied approaches to education found in different states, we predict that schools in different states will exhibit significantly different means and variances with regard to the number of themes found in their school mission statements.

In addition, demographic information will be collected from each school to examine the relationship between the number of themes present in each school mission statement and (a) the urbanicity of the school, (b) the NCLB classification of the school. We predict that schools in urban areas will have significantly more stated aims than schools in suburban areas. In addition, we predict that schools with fewer themes and schools with themes that are focused on the cognitive domain will exhibit significantly better NCLB classifications than schools with multiple themes or schools emphasizing elements other than the cognitive domain.

Research Design

A truly random sample of 50 high school mission statements was collected from ten geographically and politically diverse states: Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Texas, & Washington. In order to obtain a truly random sampling of schools, we searched the web for a complete list of public secondary schools in each

state and used a random number generator to select schools from each list. This was done by going to either <http://publicschoolreview.com> or <http://www.en.wikipedia.org>, where lists of high schools can be found for every state. Once a list was obtained, a random sample was created by going to <http://www.randomizer.org>. Each true random sample of high schools was produced this way.

As many school mission statements were gathered as possible from the selected schools by going to the schools' websites. If a mission statement was not able to be found on the school website, the school was called and the mission statement was either given over the phone, faxed, or emailed. If a high school was unable to be reached, the district office was called. The criterion used for inclusion of each state in the study was that 70% or more of the schools in our sample of 50 had to have mission statements that we could obtain. Kansas and Nebraska were initially selected for inclusion in the study, but were removed due to the fact that they did not meet this criterion. Iowa was selected as a replacement state.

In addition to gathering the school mission statements from each selected school, demographic information was collected from <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/> (the federal Department of Education website) and <http://www.greatschools.net>. The website <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/> provided information about the urbanicity of the schools. Information including the percentage of minority students enrolled in the school, the percentage of students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch program, the NCLB status, and if given the high school's website address were found at <http://www.greatschools.net>.

Instrumentation

The mission statements were analyzed using content analysis (Stemler, 2001; Weber, 1990) and coded according to a slightly modified version of the rubric described by Stemler & Bebell (1999). The scoring rubric allows for mission statements to be classified according to 10 broad themes that are emphasized. These themes include: cognitive development, social development, emotional development, civic development, physical development, vocational preparation, local community, global community, safe environment, and challenging environment. An example of how the scoring rubric is applied is listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Example Mission Statement Scored Using Rubric

<p>The vision statement is the Paramount High School community is dedicated to the <u>academic</u>, <u>social</u>, and <u>personal growth</u> of individuals within a student-centered environment that encourages students to become <u>lifelong learners</u> and <u>contributing members of a democracy</u> in an ever-changing world.</p> <p>CODING: Cognitive development, emotional development, social development, civic development</p>

Figure 2 presents examples of mission statements in the dataset that did not exhibit any of the major themes from the coding rubric.

Figure 2. Examples of overly-broad mission statements

<p>Wicksburg School, Alabama “Striving for excellence”</p> <p>Merino Junior-Senior High School, Alabama “Building tomorrow’s leaders today”</p>

Data Analysis

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc comparisons (using Tukey's HSD) will determine if significant differences exist between the average number of different themes present for different states' mission statements as well as for testing whether there are statistically significant differences in number of themes emphasized by school's urbanicity and NCLB status.

Results

Table 1 reports the percentage of schools for which we were able to obtain mission statements in each state. Also listed is the percentage of schools in our sample with a valid websites across states. Results ranged from approximately three-quarters (74%) of Iowa schools having a school website to nearly all Florida schools having a school website (98%). Mission statements were successfully obtained from 424 (85%) of the 500 schools sampled.

Table 1. Total percent of schools with websites and total n of missions obtained.

<u>State</u>	<u>N of schools sampled</u>	<u>% of schools with websites</u>	<u>% of missions obtained</u>
Alabama	50	90%	92%
California	50	80%	74%
Colorado	50	76%	84%
Florida	50	98%	84%
Iowa	50	74%	96%
Michigan	50	78%	76%
New York	50	92%	84%
North Carolina	50	96%	86%
Texas	50	86%	88%
Washington	50	86%	72%
Total n	500	424	424

The results in Table 2 show the demographic characteristics of schools in our sample. It is not surprising that Alabama has the highest proportion of rural schools in the sample (52.0%) while the vast majority of California schools randomly selected are from urban locations (64.0%). More than two-thirds (68.0%) of the schools sampled in Florida were drawn from urban locations. Across all states, approximately half of the schools in the sample are from urban settings, while just over one-third are from rural settings.

Table 2. Percentage of sampled schools by urbanicity and NCLB status

<u>State</u>	<u>Urbanicity</u>			<u>NCLB status</u>	
	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Suburban</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Passing</u>	<u>Failing</u>
1. Alabama	28.0%	14.0%	52.0%	55.3%	44.7%
2. California	64.0%	0.0%	18.0%	89.4%	10.6%
3. Colorado	40.0%	14.0%	40.0%	95.9%	4.1%
4. Florida	68.0%	4.0%	24.0%	45.7%	54.3%
5. Iowa	16.0%	14.0%	70.0%	94.0%	6.0%
6. Michigan	52.0%	8.0%	38.0%	69.7%	30.3%
7. New York	52.0%	6.0%	38.0%	95.9%	4.1%
8. North Carolina	36.0%	10.0%	50.0%	97.9%	2.1%
9. Texas	58.0%	12.0%	28.0%	85.7%	14.3%
10. Washington	54.0%	6.0%	34.0%	69.4%	30.6%
N	234	44	196	371	87

Figure 3 shows the extent to which there was variability in schools with regard to the number of themes listed in their mission statement. The distribution of the number of absolute themes listed in mission statements across schools followed a normal distribution ($m=3.4$, $sd=1.9$) with a range from 0 to 9 themes included in any given mission statement.

Figure 3. Number of themes articulated across all schools in the sample

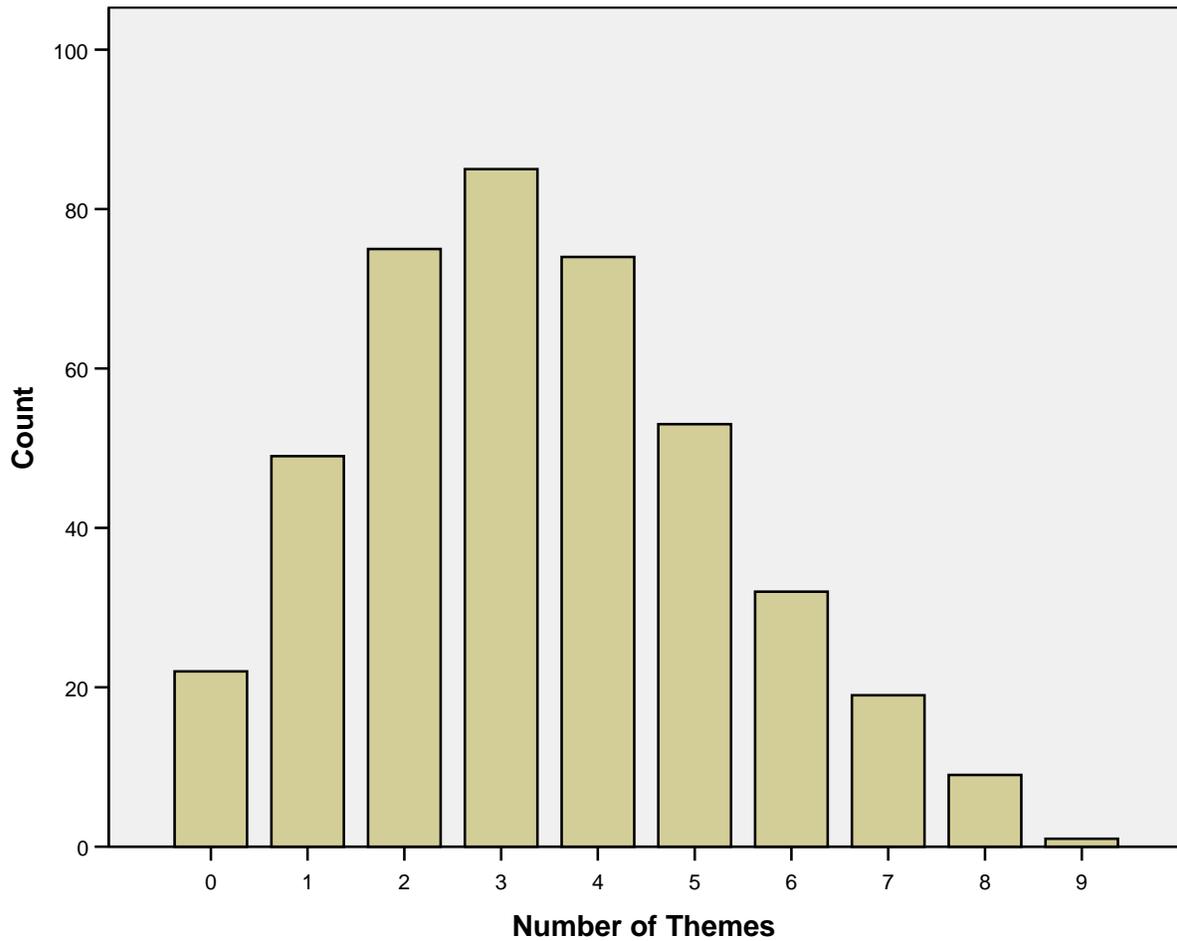


Figure 4 shows an overall picture of the frequency with which each of the 10 major thematic categories was articulated across schools in the sample. Civic development was the most frequently enlisted theme, followed by emotional development and cognitive development. The least frequently articulated elements were physical and spiritual development.

Figure 4. Frequency with which each major theme was cited across all schools in the sample

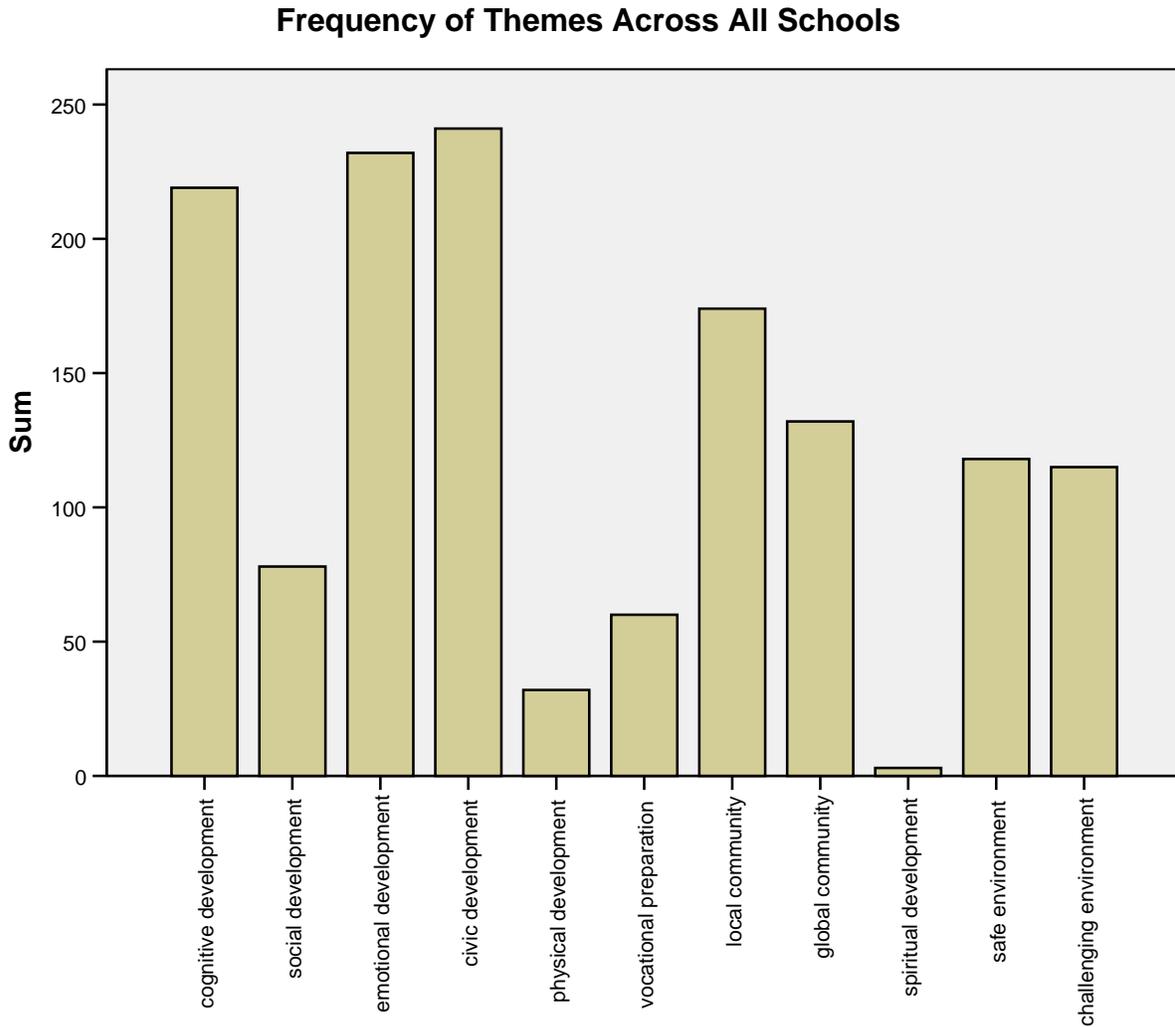
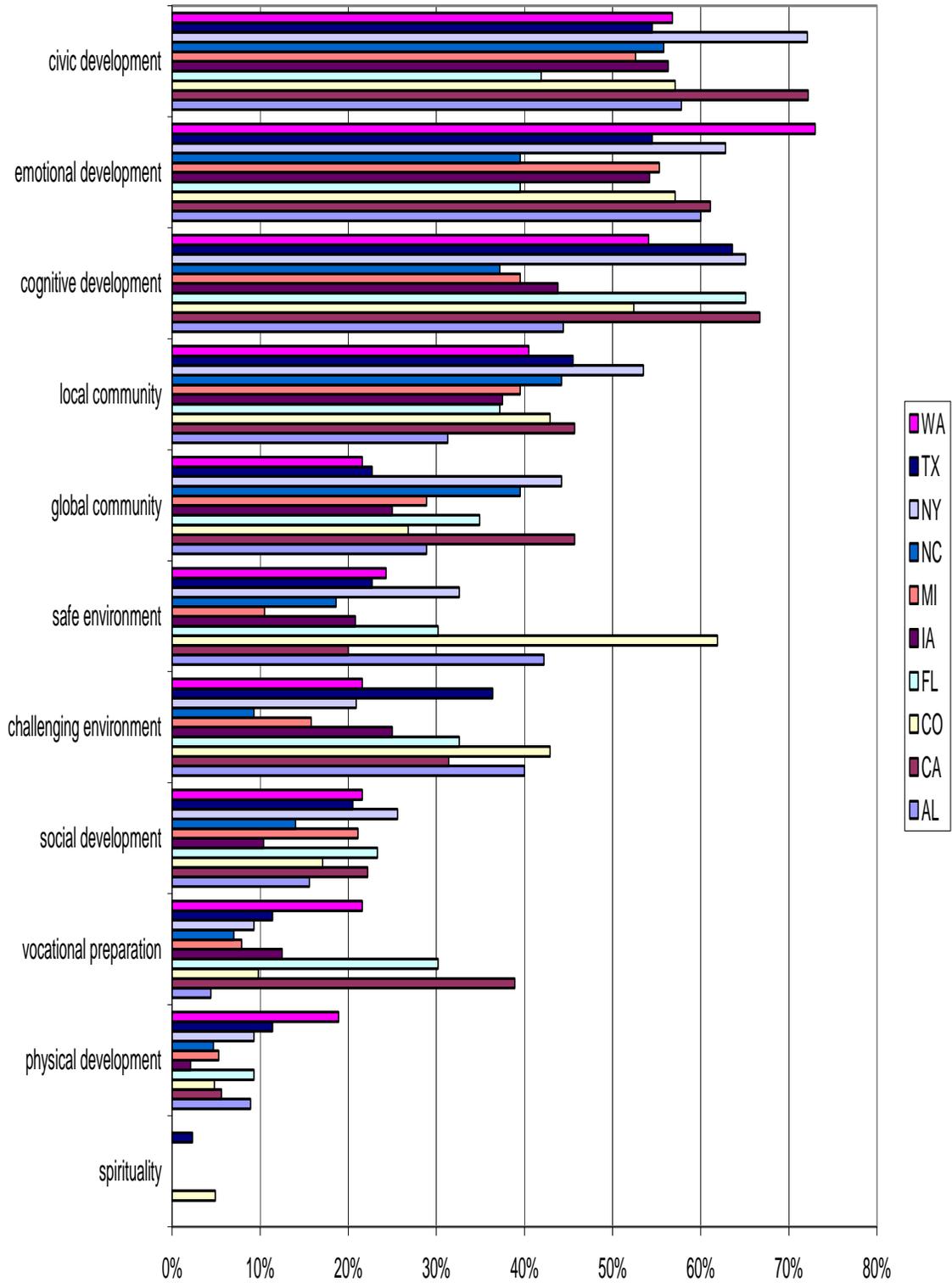


Figure 5 shows the results of an examination of frequency of themes in school mission statements as broken down by state. The purpose of this analysis is to determine whether each state tends to focus on similar themes or whether different states emphasize different primary purposes. The results indicate that the nature of the themes emphasized in school mission statements differs substantially from state to state. In particular, schools in New York and California tend to primarily emphasize civic development; schools in Colorado emphasize a safe

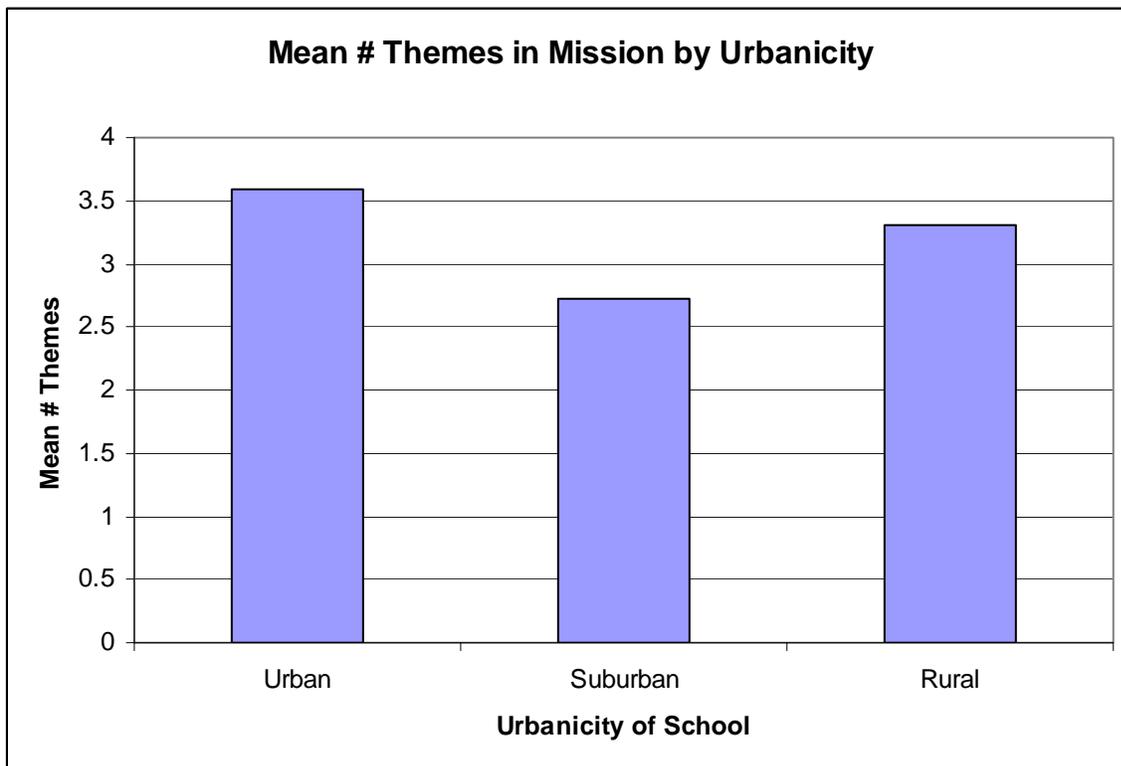
school environment; schools in Washington State emphasize emotional development; and schools in Texas, Florida, New York, and California all emphasize cognitive development.

Figure 5. Frequency of thematic elements by state.



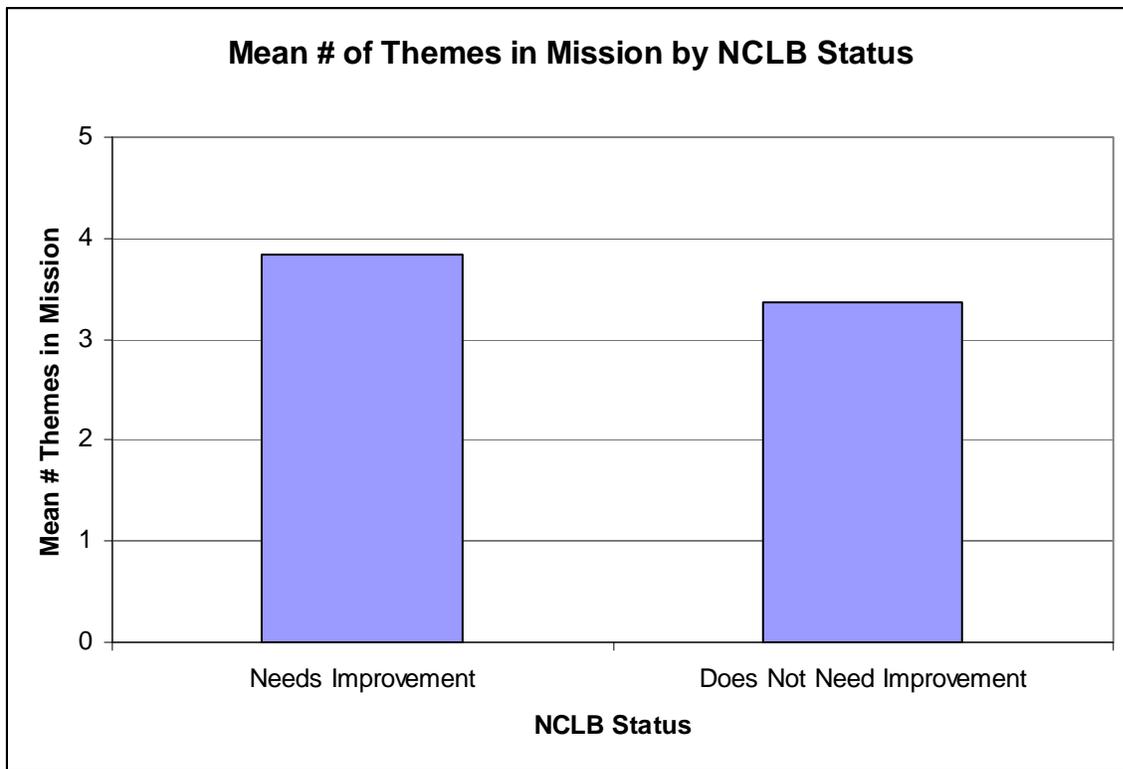
A one-way ANOVA was computed that compared the number of mission statement themes of urban, suburban, and rural schools. A significant difference was found among the schools urbanities ($F(2, 402) = 3.44, p < .05$). Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparison was used to determine the nature of the differences between urbanities. This analysis revealed that suburban schools had fewer mission statement themes ($m = 2.73, sd = 1.63$) than urban schools ($m = 3.59, sd = 1.99$). Rural schools ($m = 3.30, sd = 1.89$) were not significantly different from either of the other two groups. Figure 6 shows the mean number of themes of urban, suburban, and rural school mission statements.

Figure 6. Average number of themes endorsed by school's urbanicity.



In order to examine the relationship between the number of mission statement themes and schools' NCLB status, an independent means t-test was conducted. The results shown in Figure 7 revealed that failing schools tended to endorse a larger number of themes ($m = 3.83$, $sd = 1.94$) than those schools classified as making adequate yearly progress ($m = 3.37$, $sd = 1.90$); however, the results were not statistically significant at the .05 alpha level ($t=1.87$, $p=.06$).

Figure 7. Average number of themes endorsed by school's NCLB Status.



Discussion

The results of this study reveal several important findings. First, contrary to the common assumption that mission statements are either so broad as to be completely devoid of any meaning or so inclusive that they include almost any topic one can think of, the results indicate that most schools tend to emphasize approximately 3 to 4 purposefully selected themes within

their mission statements. Furthermore, the themes that emphasized from school to school show remarkable variability. Some of that variability is associated with differences in state-wide approaches to education. For example, in New York and California, states with the largest numbers of immigrants, the most dominant theme emphasized in school mission statements was civic development. In Colorado, home of the widely-publicized school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, the overwhelming majority of schools emphasized their mission of providing a safe learning environment. In Texas and Florida, two states that led the charge for the high-stakes testing movement, cognitive development is the most frequently emphasized theme across school mission statements.

In addition, the results show that urban schools tend to emphasize significantly more themes than do their suburban counterparts. This finding supports the argument that urban schools have a special role to play, indeed perhaps a different purpose, in the lives of their student bodies and may need to emphasize areas other than just cognitive development.

The finding that schools classified as failing on NCLB have broader missions is a bit more difficult to interpret. The most likely explanation is that this finding is confounded by the fact that a disproportionate percentage of failing schools are also urban schools. On the other hand, one alternative explanation for this finding could be that schools that are casting too broad a net with regard to their educational mission are not in-step with federal policy as interpreted via NCLB which tends to applaud schools with a more limited focus, specifically on the development of cognitive skills.

Study 2: Longitudinal Study of Massachusetts Schools

Purpose

The goal of Study 2 is to explore whether the mission statements of public high schools in Massachusetts have become narrower in the four years since the enactment of the NCLB act. We predict that the public high school mission statements collected by Stemler & Bebell in 2001 will focus on both quantitatively more and qualitatively different dimensions of schooling overall than mission statements collected from the same schools in 2006.

Research Design

School mission statements were collected from the same schools that were randomly selected in Bebell & Stemler's (2004) study of high school mission statements in Massachusetts from 2001. School mission statements were gathered from these same schools during the summer of 2006. Data were gathered via the web, fax, or phone. A total of 42 out of 45 missions (93%) were found from the original sample.

Instrumentation

Mission statements were analyzed using content analysis and following the same rubric outlined by Stemler & Bebell (1999).

Data Analysis

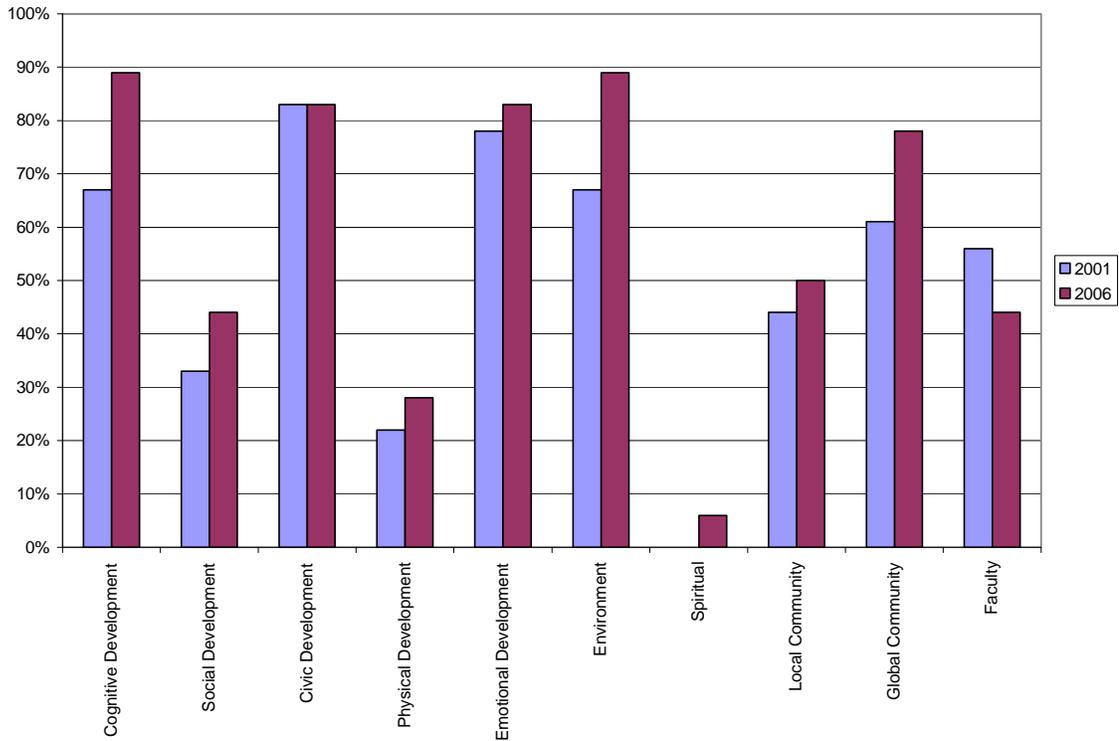
A paired-sample t-test will be used to compare differences in the number of themes present in 2001 v. 2006. In addition, post-hoc t-tests (Bonferroni) will be used to test whether

there were statistically significant gains in the percentage of schools endorsing each of the ten major themes.

Results

Figure 2 present the results of an examination of the effect of NCLB on public high schools in the United States. The number of mission statement themes for Massachusetts schools in 2001 was compared to the number in 2006 ($N = 42$). Fifty-seven percent of the schools in the data set did not change their mission statement at all in the five year period between 2001 and 2006. However, 43% of schools did revise their mission statement. Specifically, it was found that of the schools who did revisit their theme, the difference between the number of mission statement themes that Massachusetts high schools had in 2001 and the number they had in 2006 was statistically significant. Of the Massachusetts public high schools whose number of mission statement themes changed, the mean number of themes in 2001 was 5.29 and in 2006 was 6.06. It is interesting to note that each of these schools' number of mission statement themes increased. Figure 8 shows the increase in the number of themes of Massachusetts mission statements from 2001 to 2006.

Figure 8. Percentage of themes present in Massachusetts mission statements in 2001 and 2006.



Discussion

The data analyzed in study 2 lead to two important findings. First, based on our analyses of a truly random sample of MA mission statements, we can conclude that approximately half of the secondary schools in Massachusetts changed their mission statement at some point after the implementation of the federal NCLB Act. Furthermore, of those schools whose missions did change, the data show a statistically significant increase in the percentage of schools explicitly mentioning cognitive development themes such as critical thinking. Furthermore, whereas civic development and emotional development was the most frequently rated theme in this sample in 2001, cognitive development was the most frequently cited theme in mission statements in 2006. These finding seems to suggest that the federal legislation is having a direct impact on what

many schools hold as their primary purpose. Interestingly, however, the data also show that contrary to the popular belief that schools are restricting their emphasis in other areas such as social and emotional development at the expense of cognitive development, the data indicate that schools are not discarding these prior themes, but rather are simply increasing the total number of dimensions for which they are taking primary responsibility. Indeed, the number of themes mentioned in mission statements significantly increased across schools in the sample from 2001 to 2006. Whereas civic development was the only theme endorsed by more than 80% of schools in 2001, in 2006 more than 80% of schools explicitly mention civic development, cognitive development, emotional development, and a safe environment.

Conclusions and Broader Implications

Taken as a whole, the results of this study suggest that school mission statements yield systematic differences between schools both with regard to the number of themes they emphasize and the qualitative themes they choose to endorse. The findings reveal that there are systematic differences in thematic emphases that are associated with schools in different states. This finding implies that in many instances, the purpose of schooling is still very much locally controlled and adapted to the needs of the state. Yet, at the same time, the results of the longitudinal analyses reveal that when schools do make a shift in their mission, it is often in the direction of the prevailing policy winds.

Limitations

One important question that arises within the context of this research is whether or not there is any link between what school's state as their educational mission and the actual practices

and policies of the school. In other words, are mission statements truly reflective of the values of the school teachers, administrators and other stakeholders or are they simply political window dressings that shift with the policy tides without having a real impact on school practices? The data from this study provide a partial answer to this question by showing that there is substantial variability in the themes that are listed and that they differ systematically by state. These findings suggest that schools remain locally controlled; however whether the missions reflect the true values of teachers, students, and administrators is a question in need of further exploration. Future studies that conduct interviews with these stakeholders and link their responses to changes in mission statements over time are warranted.

Broader Implications

The current study has contributed to our knowledge about education in several ways. First, by evaluating empirical data from the schools themselves regarding the purposes of schooling, the project fills an existing gap in the literature.

Second, the analytic approach used in the project may establish a paradigm that could be replicated for years to come. With recent advances in technology, it is now easier than ever before to acquire school mission statements. As such, analyzing school mission statements may prove to be an efficient and useful way of gauging the political climate of a particular era and how the political climate influences the stated purposes of schooling within U.S. society.

Finally, the current study represents the first systematic, large-scale effort to randomly select schools from geographically and politically diverse states to compare their stated missions. The findings suggest that although educational purpose is still very much locally-guided, it is influenced over time by political policy changes.

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