

CHALLENGING POLITICAL SPECTACLE THROUGH GRASSROOTS POLICY DIALOGUES

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Can simply talking about policy strengthen democracy? Drawing on data collected for case studies of one Canadian and two U.S. grassroots organizations, we demonstrate that taking part in policy dialogues hosted by grassroots organizations enables participants to gain greater clarity regarding policy issues, policy processes, and citizens' perspectives and enhances some participants' ability to take direct action in policy processes. These outcomes, and the opportunities for authentic engagement in policy processes offered by grassroots policy dialogues, can help challenge contemporary policy processes characterized as political spectacle, and, ultimately, enhance democracy in education. Implications of the findings for grassroots organizations and the field of community organizing are also discussed.

Introduction

How can ordinary citizens meaningfully impact education? Despite discourses of parent and community involvement in education, education policy processes in Canada and the United States are characterized as political spectacle: a drama wherein citizens are cast as passive observers of a small group of privileged decision-makers on a metaphorical stage (Anderson, 2009; Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004; Winton, 2010b). Dissatisfied with public schools and conventional means of parent and community involvement, more citizens are turning to grassroots organizations in hopes of influencing school policy reform (Shirley, 2011). One way grassroots organizations engage citizens in education policy processes is through policy dialogues. Policy dialogues are discussions between individuals about policy issues, processes, experiences, and possibilities. Grassroots organizations may engage citizens in policy dialogues

as part of a larger change strategy or as an opportunity for exchanging ideas, thoughts, and experiences. This article examines outcomes of policy dialogues hosted by three grassroots organizations (one in Canada and two in the United States) for participants and democratic policy processes.

The activities of various grassroots reform efforts in education are documented by scholars in the burgeoning academic field of grassroots, youth, and community organizing (e.g., Evans, 2011; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006; Orr & Rogers, 2011; Shirley, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011). This body of work highlights grassroots groups' strategies and successes and their potential to effect policy change. The challenge for ordinary citizens to participate in policy processes is also recognized by education policy scholars who characterize contemporary education policy making in the United States and Canada as political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) and call for greater democracy in education policy processes (Brown & Wright, 2011; Smith et al., 2004). In this article we contribute to these two fields of research and examine if and how policy dialogues hosted by grassroots organizations can challenge political spectacle.

We begin by introducing the theory of political spectacle, reviewing recent research that uses this theory to understand contemporary policy processes, and exploring democratic alternatives to political spectacles. Next, we examine how grassroots organizations engage in education policy processes and define policy dialogues. We then introduce the three grassroots organizations we examined and describe the methodological approach to our study. A discussion of the findings follows. The findings indicate that participants who engage in education policy dialogues hosted by grassroots organizations increase their awareness and knowledge of education policy issues and some also develop their ability to take direct action to influence

policy processes. These outcomes can help challenge contemporary policy processes characterized as political spectacle, ultimately enhancing democracy in education.

What Is Political Spectacle?

Many contemporary Canadian and American education policy processes are characterized as political spectacle (Smith et al., 2004; Wright, 2005, Winton; 2010). According to Edelman (1988), political spectacles are political constructions of reality that appear to serve the public good but maintain inequities. Elements of political spectacle include symbolic language; dramaturgy; political actors cast as leaders, enemies, and allies; the illusion of rationality; distinction between on-stage and backstage action; disconnection between means and ends; and the illusion of democratic participation (Edelman, 1988; Smith et al., 2004). Political spectacles are designed to win public support for particular ideologies and courses of action (Edelman, 1998). The media play a key role in political spectacles by bringing them to the public (Edelman, 1988).

Policy processes in the political spectacle are undemocratic. Using the metaphor of a theatre, Smith et al. (2004) explain that in political spectacles ordinary citizens are cast as passive audience members who watch privileged policy actors on stage. What the audience does not see are the policy negotiations with material benefits taking place backstage. Smith et al. (2004) determine that political spectacles conceal real policy costs and benefits, make critical interrogation of policy and democratic participation in policymaking more difficult, and promote the status quo.

A number of U.S. and Canadian education processes have been examined through the lens of political spectacle. In the United States, these policies include bilingual education

(Koyama & Bartlett, 2011), universal pre-Kindergarten (Brown & Wright, 2011), Arizona's Proposition 203 (Wright, 2005), school choice, and assessment (Smith et al., 2004). All these policies are determined to be cases of political spectacle as described by Edelman (1988) or Smith et al. (2004). Finally, Winton (2010b) determined that Ontario's Character Development Initiative is also a case of political spectacle and explains that like those in the United States (Anderson, 2007; Smith et al., 2004) ordinary citizens of Ontario are often distanced from education policy-making.

More specifically, in her analysis of Ontario's Character Development Initiative, Winton (2010b) demonstrates how its development, launch, texts, and expectations include key elements of political spectacle. The introduction of the initiative, for example, involved many dramatic elements: it was introduced by politicians, civil servants, academics, and local celebrities from a podium on a stage in a hotel ballroom to an audience of teachers, parents, students, and other education stakeholders in downtown Toronto (Winton, 2010b). The province's premier was cast as a character education hero as the Ontario Minister of Education explained at the launch "that the principles of respect, responsibility, integrity, that are central to the philosophy of character education are core values held by [Premier] Dalton McGuinty" (Wynne, 2006).

Illusions of democracy were also evident in this policy case. A discussion paper about the initiative was distributed at its launch in October 2006 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). This document explains that discussion papers are prepared "to solicit ideas and solutions to combat challenges facing Ontario students *before* [emphasis added] formal policy decisions are made by the ministry" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 9). The document included a feedback form that invited readers to provide feedback on the initiative. However, in a January

2007 letter to school boards Ontario's Ministry of Education stated the Character Development Initiative had been announced in October 2006 *at the Symposium* and boards were required to implement it in schools 2007–2008 (Glaze, Zegarac, & Giroux, 2007).

Finally, the discussion paper claims that when implemented the Character Development Initiative will benefit all citizens through improved personal relationships, fewer discipline problems, greater respect for diversity, and a better match between students' values and skills and the needs of the economy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). However, the values typically taught and promoted in character education models like the one most strongly advocated by the Character Development Initiative promote compliance and conformity rather than critical analysis and democratic action (Kohn, 1997; Winton, 2010b). Further, the initiative's predominantly traditional approach to character education focuses on individuals (Winton, 2010a, 2010b), constructing them as responsible for their successes and failures in life. Social, political, and economic realities, on the other hand, are ignored (Kohn, 1997; Purpel, 1997). Thus, individuals who are economically successful are constructed as deserving because they earned it through their hard work and good character (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005; Winton, 2008). Conversely, those who are poor and in other socially disadvantaged positions are constructed as responsible for their "failures" since they lack good character required for success (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). In fact, according to Smagorinsky and Taxel (2005), these are the people who are constructed as the most in need of character education.

Alternatives and Antidotes to Political Spectacle

Smith et al. (2004) argue that political spectacle "wITHERS in an atmosphere of authentic democratic participation in politics and policy" (p. 38). Policy processes grounded in critical

democracy are an alternative to those in the political spectacle. Critical democracy is committed to equity, equality, diversity, and critical thinking as well as to citizens' participation in making decisions that affect their lives (Pinto, 2012; Solomon & Portelli, 2001). This perspective demands that all aspects of policy are inclusive, equitable, and pursued in the interest of the common good. Critical democratic policy recognizes everyone as active, legitimate policy actors and requires ordinary citizens to participate meaningfully in making public policy decisions (Pinto, 2012). Meaningful participation in decision-making requires that individuals are knowledgeable about public policy issues, can express their perspectives, have opportunities to share their experiences and ideas with the belief that they are being heard, and are involved in policy decisions. In addition to inclusive decision-making processes, the goals and ends pursued in public policy must be equitable, and there must be ongoing public examination of and dialogue about the effects of policy decisions, practices, and outcomes.

Smith et al. (2004) propose three antidotes to political spectacle that may move policy processes closer to the critical democratic ideal: clarity, art, and direct action. Clarity requires that one “understand the particulars of everyday life both for the schools and for the hidden corners where policy is made” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 257). Smith and colleagues propose this understanding arises in part from individuals sharing details of how life is experienced day-to-day by teachers, students, and communities. Along the same lines, Brown and Wright (2011) explain that “sustained public awareness is needed to transform the political spectacle to a popular movement or an institutional imperative” (p. 132).

Art is a second antidote to political spectacle proposed by Edelman (1988) and Smith et al. (2011). Art (including dance, novels, paintings, theatre, and films) challenges political spectacles by helping people look at the world in new ways. In its earliest days, one of the

grassroots organizations examined in this paper, People for Education, enacted a series of artistic performances as part of their efforts to challenge a spectacle created by the Ontario government in the late 1990s (Winton & Brewer, 2013).

Finally, Smith et al. (2004) identify direct political action “towards promoting a more robust democracy” (p. 258) as an antidote to political spectacle. Koyama and Bartlett (2011) illustrate how teachers, parents, administrators, community members, and students were able to challenge the spectacle of bilingual education policy in New York City by taking local political action. Grassroots organizations are well-known for their political action, and they have begun to focus their efforts on education (Mediratta et al., 2009). Grassroots organizations are normally place-based initiatives focused on the needs of the people involved. With regard to organizational structure, grassroots organizations have varying levels of formality, but share a commitment to member based leadership and agency (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006; Florin, Chavis, Wandersman, & Rich, 1992). Examples of grassroots organizations include community and youth organizing groups, some special interest groups and political action committees, and hybrid organizations drawing from multiple organizational models (Evans, Newman, & Winton, 2013). Some grassroots organizations use community organizing as an approach to influence policy change.

Community organizing is grounded in the belief that community conditions are shaped by power; thus, organizing aims to alter power relations so that less powerful citizens can influence policy processes in ways that improve their lives and are more equitable (Mediratta et al., 2009). Direct political action is often used in the process. Organizing is also grounded in social capital theory and aims to increase community members’ social capital by bringing community members together (Mediratta et al., 2009). Warren and Mapp (2011) define social

capital as “the resources inherent in the relationships between people that help them achieve collective aims” (p. 24). Further, contemporary organizing is committed to building members’ leadership and knowledge (Oakes, et al., 2006). Finally, grassroots organizations are independent from existing school bureaucracies. This is in contrast to many existing parent or community organizations that serve school based agendas. Groups’ independence empowers members to explore a broader array of issues and policy solutions to address specific community needs. While the independent nature of grassroots organizations might heighten tensions between schools and the community, it also creates opportunities for more authentic engagement and decision-making (Anderson, 1998; Fabricant, 2010). As public dissatisfaction with limited opportunities for engagement in policy processes has grown, more citizens are turning to grassroots organizations as means to influence education through action (Abowitz, 2013; Shirley, 2011).

Literature in the growing academic field of education organizing documents various groups’ histories, strategies, and successes (e.g., Evans & Shirley, 2008; Mediratta et al., 2009; Oakes, Renée, Rogers, & Lipton, 2008; Oakes et al., 2006; Renée, 2006; Shirley, 2011). Education organizing has lead to changes at the school and district levels including increased student achievement and school capacity (Mediratta et al., 2009). Some research identifies outcomes of participating in education organization for group members. For example, Evans and Shirley (2008) describe how participating in the Jamaica Plains-Parent Organizing Project resulted in increases in participants’ knowledge and confidence; these increases occurred in part through the network of support created by group members.

In this article we examine if, and, if so, how, policy dialogues hosted by grassroots organizations can support participants’ understanding of education policy and direct action in

policy processes and thereby challenge political spectacles. In the next section we define policy dialogues and review what is known about the outcomes of these dialogues for participants.

Policy Dialogues

Policy dialogues are discussions between individuals about policy problems, ideas, experiences, effects, outcomes, and processes. They occur in face-to-face meetings, online, and through texts (Joshee & Johnson, 2007; Pollock & Winton, 2011). Policy dialogues may be more or less formal. Informal policy dialogues are those that occur spontaneously between individuals, while formal dialogues are purposely organized or facilitated through various structures. Formal dialogues may be designed to inform decision-makers or to promote participants' learning about and engagement with policy.

Many studies that focus on the outcomes of citizen participation in policy dialogues (both online and face-to-face) examine the impact of participating in government-hosted dialogues. The studies find that participants encounter new ideas and perspectives and acquire new knowledge (e.g., Davies, McCallie, Simonson, Lehr, & Duensing, 2009; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Gronlund, Strandberg, & Himmelroos, 2009; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009; Price, 2009). For example, participants in an online policy dialogue hosted by the Ministry of Education of British Columbia reported that they learned a lot through reading others' posts (Klinger, 2002). One said, "dialogue via the Internet gives everyone a chance to 'hear' other viewpoints. Even if you are not ready to contribute your own views, you are able to see how others respond to various topics and broaden your horizons" (Klinger, 2002, p. 141).

Gunn and Carlitz (2003) report that, in addition to learning more about education and about new perspectives on education, online dialogue participants in the Master Plan for

California Education dialogue became more interested in politics and government after participating. Increasing interest is important because citizens who are more interested and knowledgeable about political issues are more politically active (Jacobs et al., 2009; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006) and action begets action (Mossberger et al., 2008).

While political knowledge is an important precondition for active civic involvement (Putnam, 2000), so, too, is political efficacy. “Without a sense of internal political efficacy, citizens will likely become apathetic about, indifferent to and disengaged from the democratic process” (Morrell, 2005, p. 50). Based on a survey of over 1500 US residents, Jacobs et al. (2009) conclude that discussing community issues bolsters “the knowledge, interest, attention, efficacy and trust that are known precursors for participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995)” (p. 102).

While most research on outcomes of policy dialogues finds positive outcomes, a few do not. Some studies suggest that participating in dialogues about race or where oppositional viewpoints are shared decreases participants’ political engagement, increases civic withdrawal, intensifies group differences of opinion, and heightens perceptions of an issue’s irresolvability (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Mutz, 2006). To achieve positive outcomes of dialogues in these circumstances Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) propose dialogues between groups be structured so lines of differences between them are less salient and threats to group interests are reduced. The dialogues should also be frequent and ongoing in order to develop participants’ understanding of the other group’s interests and that the fates of both groups are connected.

While policy dialogues may occur formally, such as those hosted by governments, or informally between friends, family, and associates, organized policy dialogues not intended to influence policy are also becoming more common (Davies et al., 2009). Examples include Science Cafés designed to promote public engagement with science and accountability, dialogues about science held by the Dana Centre in London, England (Davies et al., 2009), and People for Education’s *Schools at the Centre* dialogues to promote citizens’ engagement with education (People for Education, 2010). These face-to-face dialogues promote participants’ learning (Davies et al., 2009) and their cognitive and emotional engagement with policy (Winton, 2010c). Dialogues of this second type are under-researched (Davies et al., 2009).

This study contributes to emerging research on outcomes of grassroots education efforts and consequences of participation in policy dialogues as it relates to engagement with education policy, political spectacle, and democratic education.

Methodological Approach

The impetus for this article began with the authors’ shared interest in grassroots organizations’ efforts to influence education policy. Each author was in the midst of conducting independent research about one (Winton) or two (Evans) organizations involved in policy processes. The authors’ conversations about the outcomes of the groups’ efforts to influence policy acknowledged that claims of “success” often depended on whether there was a formal change in policy at the school, district, or provincial/state government level. The authors noted, however, that their data suggested there are additional outcomes of engaging in grassroots organizations’ efforts that were not recognized in this definition of success. While noting that the three groups vary in terms of their goals and activities, they all engage members of the public in

policy dialogues as part of their work, albeit in different ways (e.g., at house meetings, conferences, one-on-one meetings, or online). The authors agreed to examine their data to see if engaging in policy dialogues produced individual outcomes for participants and democratic policy processes. Specifically, the questions guiding this study were *What are outcomes of participating in policy dialogues for participants?* and *What are outcomes of participating in policy dialogues for democratic policy processes?*

An interpretive multi-case study approach was used to answer these research questions. In general, the case study approach involves description and analysis of a bounded entity (Merriam, 2001). This approach is particularly useful when a researcher investigates a contemporary phenomenon over which he or she has little or no control (Yin, 1994). Interpretive case studies are useful when the intention of the study is to theorize about a phenomenon; other purposes of case studies include describing and evaluating a phenomenon (Merriam, 2001). Multi-case studies involve the comparison of two or more cases and enable researchers to identify commonalities and differences across the cases (Merriam, 2001). The current study involves three cases: People for Education's (P4E) online community; United Interfaith Action (UIA), a faith based community organizing group in Massachusetts; and the Lexington, Massachusetts, chapter of Stand for Children (SFC), a grassroots child advocacy group.

P4E engages in a wide range of activities including research, supporting parents through an annual conference, a phone line, and a website; advocating for policy change at the provincial level in Ontario; sitting at government policymaking tables; and encouraging citizens to engage in education locally and beyond. In 2008, P4E hosted a series of face-to-face dialogues with citizens across Ontario about education policy alternatives. Encouraged by the success of the dialogues, P4E began facilitating online dialogues about education on their website. To date,

over 1200 individuals are members of what P4E calls its online community (this number does not include individuals who read the dialogues but have not signed up as members). In 2011 and 2012, 19 online dialogue participants took part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to understand outcomes of participating in the dialogues in relation to their engagement with education policy. The interviews provide the data for the P4E case discussed here.

Data for SFC and UIA were collected as a part of a larger comparative case study on participation in community based organizations (Evans, 2009). This study aimed to understand what motivates individuals to participate in community-based organizations (CBOs) involved in education organizing, how CBO members learn the work of education organizing, the skills (if any) members acquire through organizing, and the impact (both material and personal) participating in CBOs has on members' lives. SFC and UIA conduct face-to-face policy dialogues in a variety of venues as part of their organizing efforts: in one-to-one meetings between organization leaders and members, house meetings involving organization leaders and members, and local conferences or workshops related to organizational initiatives. Seventeen participants were interviewed over a 2-year period (nine in SFC and eight in UIA). They were asked questions such as *Why did you decide to become involved with this particular group? What have you learned as a result of your participation in this organization?* Data was also collected through observations of organizational activities and a review of pertinent documentation.

Data collected for each of the three cases was analyzed (P4e) or re-analyzed (SFC and UIA) for the current study. The analysis process involved using Lichtman's three Cs approach (Lichtman, 2010). This six-step approach first requires analysts to create an initial set of codes based on the central ideas encountered in the data while reading. In this study, references to outcomes of participating in the policy dialogues were highlighted and assigned a code name

based on the outcome. Initial codes included: *fundraising; sent email to another participant; got answers; shared idea with colleague; learned how policy looks elsewhere; met new people; new ideas; affirmation; newspaper interview; and more self-confidence*. The next steps in the three Cs process include revisiting the initial list of codes and creating an initial list of categories by grouping like codes together (Lichtman, 2010). In this study, initial codes were grouped into categories such as *learning about policies, learning about policy processes, change efforts at school, change efforts in community, learning from others, feelings about self, and feelings about others*. The next steps in the analysis process are modifying the initial list of categories based on rereading and revisiting the list of categories to remove redundancies and identify critical elements. The final step is to move from categories to concepts that reflect the meaning attached to the data (Lichtman, 2010). Concepts identified in the three cases in this study are *new knowledge, taking action, confidence, and relationships*.

Finally, findings from the three cases (P4E, SFC, and UIA) were compared to identify similarities and differences between the outcomes of policy dialogues for participants.

Findings

Taking part in policy dialogues enables participants to gain greater clarity regarding policy issues, policy processes, and citizens' perspectives and enhances some participants' ability to take direct action in policy processes. Clarity and direct action are two antidotes to political spectacle (Smith et al., 2004). Below we present evidence from our cases that demonstrate outcomes of policy dialogues for participants and the contributions of grassroots organizations' policy dialogues to democratic policy processes.

(Increased) Clarity

Dialogue participants gained increased clarity about policy issues and processes and about citizens' perspectives and shared interests. While the participants in our study varied widely in the depth of knowledge they brought to the policy dialogues, all but one participant in the three case studies indicated that participating in policy dialogues increased his or her knowledge of education policy issues. Participants in P4E's online dialogue explained they learned factual information about specific policies and how the same policy issue plays out in other communities. Policies discussed by participants include fundraising, school councils, large scale testing, newcomer supports, health, accommodation reviews, anaphylaxis, libraries, and education funding. New knowledge gained from P4E's dialogues helped participants better understand what was taking place in their own situations. For example, one participant explained that learning how other school councils operated helped her to better understand her own school council. Another reported,

[you learn] new ideas, or just a different way to look at solving a problem, like, you know, in your own area, in your own area you, you can kind of go okay I'll do it that way. But then when you see another school, it might be how they solve the problem, um, how they communicate it. . . . Like just, another way to communicate, or another group to communicate with that maybe I hadn't thought of.

SFC members similarly stated their understanding of policy issues became more nuanced as they exchanged stories about their experiences through one-on-one and house meetings.

Stories exchanged in the groups' policy dialogues introduced participants to new perspectives. As one P4E participant explained,

there are a lot of parents, actually, on that, on that community . . . from, um, different geographical locations. And that also is interesting, coming from a very metropolitan, urban centre . . . to hear the voices of, of, of parents who li-, who may live in northern Ontario, right?

Another participant said,

[in the dialogues] you will see a very different approach maybe in inner-city Toronto than you would in, out in the suburbs. So that's the kind of thing I love reading and I love taking part in because . . . there's things that happen in certain places that I have no idea about.

Finally, a third stated “I kind of feel like there are voices that I’m not able to access on a regular basis. And so, I kind of am able to . . . hear those voices, and it kind of shapes how I view the education system overall.” As this quote suggests, in some cases participants’ exposure to alternate perspectives affects how they think about issues.

The dialogues also helped participants recognize their shared interests. For example, following their annual statewide conference one SFC member remarked, “I think that we have a responsibility not just to our own kids but to the kids across the state. Really a rising tide raises all ships. If we can work for a better educational system and better funding for the educational system across the state it would just be better for everyone.” In P4E’s dialogues, a few participants located in different parts of the province but sharing the common experience of fighting school closings found one another through the dialogue and subsequently created a new group to address the issue (discussed further below).

SFC members also report gaining new knowledge about policy processes through participating in policy dialogues. Indeed, many members had explicitly joined the group in hopes of gaining this knowledge. “I was hoping that Stand would do a couple of things,” said one member, “I wanted it to help educate me about broader issues and how to make a real difference. I wanted to learn how to get organized because it was very apparent to me that we all needed to get organized.” Several of the members used the analogy of receiving a political roadmap: “It was mapped out start to finish before we even started. That’s so grounding it’s like, oh, okay, I see how you get from A to Z and then we just did it step by step by step.”

In recognition of the value of knowing the basics, the SFC strategy team decided early on that one of their goals during policy dialogues was to educate one another about the political process. They spent time diagramming the town and how it functions, and discovered that too often it was assumed that people already possessed this knowledge, when in reality most of the members had never even attended a town or school committee meeting. Sharing public information became a critical part of SFC's work.

In contrast, UIA had over ten years of organizing experience in the city of New Bedford before turning to education issues. By then, they had established cordial relationships with the majority of the local politicians and with various social service agencies. They had achieved several political victories (such as an increase in the amount of community policing efforts) and earned the respect of key political players in the area (Evans, 2011); however, they initially lacked knowledge of policy processes in the field of education specifically. It was through policy dialogues with school leaders and teachers that they learned about who controls school spending, curriculum implementation processes, and overarching federal policies that impacted their campaign.

P4E participants did not report learning about policy processes. This absence may reflect the nature of P4E's dialogues and the organization. While P4E encourages citizens to engage with public education and parents to advocate for their schools and children, it does not aim to mobilize citizens towards obtaining specific policy goals through engaging in collective political action. Thus, unlike SFC, P4E does not explicitly try to educate citizens about how to influence formal decision-making processes in its online dialogues.

Enhanced Capacity to Engage in Direct Action

Participating in policy dialogues enhances some participants' ability to engage directly in policy processes. This enhanced ability arises from participants' new knowledge about policy issues and processes, enhanced confidence, and expanded social networks. We discuss each in turn below while recognizing that the outcomes are not mutually exclusive.

Individuals join grassroots organizations with varying levels of comfort and ability in education policy processes. Our findings suggest that participation in policy dialogues through grassroots organizations supports the development of members' capacity for taking direct action from myriad starting points. In the case of P4E's online dialogues, most participants were already highly involved in education when they joined. Nevertheless, some participants credit P4E's online community for enabling and inspiring their action at local and provincial levels. For example, one participant explained that the legislative information she received from another participant enabled her to effectively challenge illegal practices in her school. Another participant explained,

[at our school] there was a big debate about launching a website for the parent community, uh, a parent council website and there was all this back and forth. And so I went on that site to connect and find out what have other parent groups have done . . . are there policies against this or are we just hearing a load of crap? . . . They were able to sort of arm me with a bunch of things to go back and say, "you know, there's no reason why we can't have this" . . . it saved me a lot of time searching and trying to find policies and trying to show examples and trying to look at the other arguments.

SFC members also explained that through the dialogues they developed deeper expertise on policy issues that enhanced their ability to engage with formal policy makers. As one member said, "the funny thing is now, they (the policy makers) don't know that I am a volunteer. They think I am a professional . . . that's the level of learning that occurs."

For many members of UIA, their participation in the organization was the first time that they had engaged in political processes. They learned about the power of numbers and how their phone calls and letters to local and state leaders could become a catalyst for change. UIA members noted that they felt “smarter,” that they were “better prepared,” and that they felt like their voice “mattered”:

I feel like I am in the midst of something bigger than me and I have been in the city for 44 years and for most of my life I haven't bothered with the politics because I always saw this “good old boys” way of doing things and it wasn't about the individual, it wasn't about the people, it was about those who held the power and playing games.

UIA policy dialogues provided a platform that not only gave members a voice, but created a venue in which they had access to the channels of power.

Closely related to increases in participants' ability to participate in policy processes was an increase in personal confidence. The collaborative nature of the learning and sharing within the policy dialogues helped instill confidence in members and motivated some to act. As one P4E interviewee said,

you know, you're mulling something over in your head and you think, “Am I the only person that sees this or thinks this? Should I be saying something,” and sometimes you'll see it there and it's like, “Okay. It's not just here and it's not just me. It's for real,” which enables you then to maybe take something forward that maybe you would be hesitant to.

Similarly, another participant who was opposed to having her son write Ontario's grade 3 standardized tests in Math and Literacy reported,

there were some parents [online] who said, “I was able to get my child out of the testing.” And so, that kind of gave me encouragement to question the quote unquote “party line” I was getting from the administration at my son's school and say, “Well, I know there are other parents who have been able to do that.”

The knowledge that one is affiliated with others helps those who might otherwise feel

intimidated by powerful individuals. “Being a Stand member makes it a lot easier to make that call and say, whether it’s to the superintendent of schools or the chair of the board of selectmen or the chair of the school committee . . . When you say who it is, they know who you are.” UIA members also expressed their increasing levels of comfort attending public meetings. For participants who had been UIA members for six months or more, the opportunity to participate in UIA activities provided a strong sense of empowerment and personal growth. When asked about their role in various public actions, three of the participants commented that they never could have imagined participation at these types of events prior to their involvement with UIA.

In addition, participants in all three groups’ dialogues report they developed new or expanded social networks through their participation. For example, two P4E participants formed new groups with people they met in an online dialogue about school closing reviews. These new groups exchanged information and strategies, created web pages, attracted new members, and mobilized to protest school closings in communities across the province. One participant explains the importance of the online dialogue in this process:

I just can’t say enough about People for Ed. I mean, they got us together and they provided the forum for people all over the province to start talking and discussing accommodation reviews. And then we just got together separately and have formed two separate groups now. And we’re, you know, we’re rallying and we’re fighting these accommodation reviews and fighting these, these rogue school boards and what they’re doing. And, uh, yeah, we couldn’t have done it without People for Ed.

In the case of UIA, a new member observed after her first national training,

it just blew my mind that there was 150 people gathered in one place for a whole week, from all different religious backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, geographic backgrounds, and but we rarely had disagreements. We talked about our experiences and there was that sort of feeling where even though you just met, you felt like you knew each other for years.

Like the UIA participant above, SFC members' expanded social networks included individuals who differed from the members' personal identity in some way. Some of the differences cited were based on geography, cultural background, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, political affiliations, socioeconomic status, occupational status, and the age of children. Several of the study participants specifically noted how SFC differed from a more traditional education organizing entity, the parent teacher association. Even though Lexington is a relatively small community, SFC policy dialogues created opportunities for citizens to meet people they otherwise would not have met. As one member remarked, "it cuts across boundaries. I have met more people I never would have met or chosen to work with who were really tough to work with. I'm sure they thought I was tough to work with . . . but I hugely value that part of it, you can learn from everybody."

Even those in SFC who initially felt well versed on an issue, perhaps because of their professional backgrounds, remarked about the value of their expanding networks: "The truth is I got involved for the override, but I stayed because I like the way I am now connected with people all over town. I like being a part of this big network and I learn so much." In all three case studies the policy dialogues offered a means to increase "bridging" social capital (Putnam, 2000), by extending members' networks beyond their existing cliques and resulting in enhanced knowledge of policy issues. In some cases (especially for UIA and SFC participants) this enhanced knowledge was later translated into civic engagement and political action.

Discussion and Implications

The study's findings suggest grassroots policy dialogues offer a means to challenge political spectacles in education by enabling participants to develop clarity about issues and take

direct action. Clarity involves understanding the diverse experiences of individuals affected by education policy as well as the particulars about policy making processes (Smith et al., 2004). Participants in the grassroots policy dialogues acquired new knowledge about policy issues and encountered perspectives that differed from, and often disputed, dominant policy narratives. Participants can use their new knowledge to challenge political spectacles that aim to conceal who benefits and loses most from undemocratic policy processes.

Learning through participating in policy dialogues has also been observed in policy dialogues about public policy hosted by governments (Gunn & Carlitz, 2003; Klinger, 2002) and not-for-profit organizations (Davies et al., 2009; Jacobs et al., 2009). They have also been identified through experimental research. For example, in a quasi-experimental study of deliberative processes for the purpose of making policy recommendations, Grönlund, Strandburg, and Himmelroos (2009) found that participation in online and face-to-face policy deliberations between ordinary citizens leads to knowledge gains and opinion changes about the issue under discussion. Knowledge about an issue is a precondition for more active involvement (Putnam, 2000); indeed, political knowledge predicts political action (Mossberger et al., 2008). In addition, the current study's findings also show that participating in grassroots dialogues enhanced participants' efficacy. A sense of political efficacy is a precursor to active engagement in politics (Morrell, 2005)

The study's findings demonstrate that participating in grassroots dialogues encouraged and enabled some participants to take direct action. This outcome was most evident for SFC and UIA participants. This is not surprising given the goals of these organizations and the organizing approaches they utilized to achieving them. This supports previous research that finds participating in dialogues leads to other kinds of public involvement (Jacobs et al., 2009). Price

(2009), for example, found that participants in a health-related online dialogue reported greater engagement in other health policy activities including donating money, working for advocacy groups, and attending meetings. Similarly, Mossberger et al. (2008) report that participating in real time online dialogues predicts voting in presidential elections.

The findings add to understanding about education organizing by highlighting how policy dialogues, an important organizing strategy used to build relationships and identify community concerns, contribute to one of community organizing's central goals: empowerment. In addition, the study's findings provide additional evidence at the micro-level of outcomes of education organizing for participants identified by Evans and Shirley (2008): increases in members' knowledge and confidence, and the development of a supportive social network. Further, the experience of P4E's online participants suggests these outcomes can arise through online dialogues as well as through face-to-face meetings, and when individuals do not take collective action.

While the current study demonstrates that policy dialogues hosted by different kinds of grassroots organizations provide opportunities for participants to gain new knowledge and resources that can be used to challenge political spectacles, it leaves important questions unanswered. For example, it does not explain how national context affects outcomes of policy dialogues. It is widely recognized that context affects policy processes (Opfer, Young, & Fusarelli, 2008; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor, 1997); future research should investigate how national (and other contexts) affect outcomes of policy dialogues for participants. A second direction for future research might involve examining in more depth how a group's general purposes and goals, and the goals of their policy dialogues, affect outcomes. Finally, future

research might examine how politics and power *within* groups affect participants' dialogue experiences and outcomes.

The current study demonstrates that engaging in policy dialogues provides authentic opportunities for parents and other citizens to engage in policy processes. Political spectacles operate in part through illusions of democracy, including inauthentic discourses of parent and community involvement in education policy decisions (Anderson, 2009). Inauthentic participatory structures re-establish social and political inequalities and perpetuate inequitable outcomes (Anderson, 2009).

A number of implications arise from the findings. First, they suggest that grassroots organizations should host policy dialogues in their efforts to increase citizens' knowledge about education, build members' confidence so they will engage in policy processes, develop members' social network and capital, and enhance democracy in education. For some groups, especially those in the tradition of community organizing, these dialogues occur as part of the groups' process of recruiting members, identifying community concerns, and developing local leadership. In these cases, policy dialogues' contributions to the overall goals of education organizing should be recognized even when direct actions are unsuccessful. For other kinds of grassroots organizations policy dialogues can be undertaken as deliberate initiatives with the explicit goal to democratize policy processes.

Finally, the findings show that policy dialogues that occur online or in face-to-face meetings have similar outcomes for participants. Grassroots organizations that focus on only one kind of dialogue might consider using the other as well. While some grassroots organizations may be primarily interested in changing local policies, enabling members to exchange

knowledge and experiences with individuals in other locales may expose them to new ideas, perspectives and possibilities for their communities that they might not otherwise encounter.

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