FRAMING COMMON CORE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF MEDIA AND POLICY AGENDA SETTING
IN OKLAHOMA AND NEW MEXICO

by

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A THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2018
ABSTRACT

Education has been cited as an important political issue in the United States for decades, yet little research has been done on how the media influence education policy. The Common Core State Standards—which were recently adopted by nearly all 50 states—present an especially interesting case study of how the media can influence different policy outcomes in different places. This study investigated whether agenda setting and differences in framing by the media could have played a role in differing policy outcomes regarding Common Core in two states, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

A content analysis was conducted of all newspaper articles referencing Common Core in the largest daily circulation newspapers in Oklahoma and New Mexico from 2010 through 2016, and the frequency of media coverage was compared to the amount of legislation regarding Common Core that was discussed by each state legislature during that same time period. A descriptive analysis was conducted to determine whether the media influenced the policy agenda or vice versa in each location. Additionally, a more in-depth content analysis of newspaper articles was conducted to determine whether there were differences in how Common Core was described, or framed, by the media in each state.

Results indicate that there were indeed differences in who set the agenda and how Common Core was described by the media in each state. Whereas the policy agenda set the media agenda in Oklahoma (where Common Core was eventually repealed), the media agenda appeared to set the policy agenda in New Mexico (where Common Core has been largely supported). Moreover, Common Core was uniquely described in Oklahoma media outlets as a
federal overreach into state issues, whereas New Mexico media uniquely described Common Core as an assessment tool and accountability measure and allotted substantial space to discussing the details of the standards as well as the logistics of implementing them. Although more research needs to be done, this study seems to indicate that traditional news media continue to play a strong role in politics via agenda setting.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to everyone who has contributed to this thesis in ways large and small. First and foremost, I must thank Dr. William J. Gonzenbach, first for allowing an eager master’s student to enroll his doctoral seminar on public opinion, but then secondly for guiding this research with invaluable expertise and care. He was a tremendous resource in helping me to envision and execute a project of which I am incredibly proud!

My committee members, Dr. Margot O. Lamme and Dr. George L. Daniels, deserve great credit for guiding my development as a young researcher in some of my very first classes as a master’s student.

Without Dr. Lamme, I might have never connected with Dr. Gonzenbach, who became a pillar for this project. She was a constant resource of inspiration and always willing to brainstorm ideas on how I might blend my interests in communication and education.

I owe to Dr. Daniels my confidence in being able to conduct and present graduate-level research. His advice helped me grow leaps and bounds as a researcher, and I am grateful for his guidance which eventually became fodder for this thesis.

Last but certainly not least, I must express my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to my coders—Macy, Miller, and Joshua. Recognizing the importance of this project, they handled my data with utmost care and executed their jobs to the highest standard, despite requiring hours of their time. Without you, this thesis would not have been possible.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 RESULTS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

1. Statistics Measuring Reliability of Attributes

.................................................................35
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Media coverage and bills regarding Common Core in Oklahoma .................................36
2. Media coverage and legislative action regarding Common Core in Oklahoma ...............37
3. Media coverage and bills regarding Common Core in New Mexico ..............................38
4. Media coverage and legislative action regarding Common Core in New Mexico ............39
5. Attributes of Common Core in *The Oklahoman* ..........................................................40
6. Attributes of Common Core in the *Albuquerque Journal* ............................................41
7. Frames of Common Core in *The Oklahoman* ...............................................................42
8. Frames of Common Core in the *Albuquerque Journal* ..................................................43
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Education reform has been consistently on the United States’ national policy agenda since the mid-1960s. Since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was first passed in 1965, the federal government has continually launched and supported programs aimed at increasing public access to quality education and improving achievement among students attending public schools (The federal role in education, 2016). Since that time, the U.S. Department of Education was established as its own, cabinet-level agency, the first time since 1867, and the ESEA was reauthorized twice, once in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act and again in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act; The federal role in education, 2016). Since 1965, the Department of Education’s annual budget has grown by more than $50 billion (The federal role in education, 2016). And yet despite decades of growing federal support, recent education reforms have been met with frustration, leading states to seek their own solutions to an issue perceived to be of local and national importance. Whereas the federal No Child Left Behind Act focused on testing and teacher accountability as the solution to raising quality, the states proposed a different solution—the adoption of “a common core of internationally benchmarked standards” that describe “what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade” (“Development process,” n.d.; “About the Common Core State Standards”, n.d.).

The idea of a common core of academic standards was first discussed by the Council of Chief State School Officers at its annual forum in 2007 (“Development process,” n.d.).
Following that discussion, the group of top-ranking school officials of every U.S. state joined the National Governors Association in recommending that states adopt such standards “to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive” (“Development process,” n.d.). Work commenced on the standards in 2009, a process led by the governors and chief school officials of each state (“Development process,” n.d.). By 2013, 45 states had adopted the Common Core State Standards (“Development process,” n.d.).

Yet even public opinion of Common Core, a state-led initiative, plummeted fast (“Development process,” n.d.). By 2014, three states had repealed the academic standards, and others had spent much of 2014 discussing doing the same (Associated Press, 2014; “Development process,” n.d.; Lu, 2014). Why did public opinion shift so quickly? And why did public opinion of Common Core plummet in some states but not others? This paper proposes that the media—specifically through the process of agenda setting whereby the media influence the public’s perception of the importance of political issues—could have played a role.

In studying mass communication and the media’s effect on publics, Walter Lippmann observed in 1922 that very little of what the public understands about reality is, in fact, reality (Lippmann, 1922). Rather, the public relies on the media to construct a simplified version of reality that is easier to understand and substitutes for direct experience, which often results in the public acting upon representations of the real world in which they actually live (Lippmann, 1922). As scholars have expanded upon Lippmann’s observations, it has become clear that, as noted by Bernard Cohen, the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963). In other words, while the mass media may have little effect on the strength or direction of
attitudes, the media do affect salience, or our perceptions of what aspects of our environment are most important (Cohen, 1963).

Regarding politics, especially, it has been observed that the media’s effect on the public is particularly strong. As Shaw and McCombs observed, “Perhaps more than any other aspect of our environment, the political arena—all those issues and persons about whom we hold opinions and knowledge—is a secondhand reality” (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, p. 7). This is especially true of issues with which we have little personal experience or direct contact (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). No matter our experience, the world presented to us by the media represents a mere fraction of political reality, so any knowledge gained from that constructed reality is also limited (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). As Shaw and McCombs point out, “That real world shrinks as the news media decide what to cover and which aspects to transmit in their reports, and as audiences decide to which news messages they will attend” (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, p. 7). Yet this shrunken world is what guides our political responses (Shaw & McCombs, 1977).

While researchers have investigated the effects of agenda setting on numerous issues of national importance including AIDS, the use of drugs, and other issues, the need for agenda setting research continues as social issues like education remain unsolved and the media permeate more and more of our everyday lives through 24-hour news cycles (Gonzenbach, 1992; Linsky, 1986; Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991). If research shows that the media do, in fact, continue to set public and political agendas as the media have done in the past, then perhaps the electorate, armed with that information, might seek out more direct experience with political issues and rely less on the media to shape their knowledge of politics. At the very least, organizations aimed at solving social issues might spend more of their time ensuring that the media paint comprehensive pictures of reality. In short, if public opinion is not based on reality,
but rather the media’s depiction of reality, then whether social reforms succeed depends largely upon the media.

To determine whether the media played a role in differing policies regarding Common Core, this study compares media coverage of Common Core in two states, Oklahoma and New Mexico, to determine whether there were differences in how Common Core was portrayed and to investigate whether a relationship exists between how Common Core was portrayed by the media and how Common Core fared politically in each state. This paper relies on the concept of agenda setting, or the idea that the media influence salience and the public’s perception of reality, and therefore political outcomes. Oklahoma and New Mexico were chosen because of the stark differences in how Common Core has been addressed through policy in each location—whereas Oklahoma adopted and then repealed Common Core, New Mexico has supported it (Associated Press, 2014). This study also investigates second-level agenda-setting effects in each state by identifying not only how often Common Core was covered in the media, but how Common Core was described by the media in news and opinion articles printed in the state’s largest daily circulation newspapers. The frequency of media coverage of Common Core was compared to the amount of legislation regarding Common Core that appeared in each state, and attributes and frames of Common Core were analyzed to determine similarities and differences between how Common Core was described in the two states.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the term agenda setting while studying the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Although others had observed the mass media’s apparent influence over voters, helping the public to learn about political issues during campaigns, McCombs and Shaw were the first to investigate agenda setting empirically (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They hypothesized that the mass media actually set the agenda for political campaigns by influencing voters’ perceptions of a campaign’s key issues (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Cohen, 1963; Lang & Lang, 1966; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Trenaman & McQuail, 1961).

To test their hypothesis, they interviewed registered voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, about what they perceived to be the most important issues of the election, while at the same time they analyzed the content of mass media used by those voters, focusing on how often and how prominently the election’s various issues were covered by the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). “Major” news coverage of an issue was defined as having larger amounts of time or space allotted to that issue, as well as coverage appearing in the outlet’s most prominent position—the lead story of a newspaper or broadcast, for example (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In this initial study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a very strong relationship (correlations of +.967 and above) between the issues perceived to be important by the voters and the issues of importance as presented by the media. In other words, what was identified as a “major” or “minor” issue by the press was also largely identified as such by the public, regardless of voters’ preferred candidates or parties (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While their findings didn’t prove that
the mass media had influenced the public’s agenda, the 1972 study indicated that a strong relationship between media coverage and the public’s agenda did indeed exist, and it paved the way for subsequent studies that would continue to build their case. Countless researchers have studied agenda setting in their footsteps; as of 2005, more than 400 studies on agenda setting had been published (McCombs, 2005).

In 1977, Shaw and McCombs published a second study investigating the effect of time on the relationship—they asked: Do the media influence the public, or does the public influence the media? For their second study, Shaw and McCombs (1977) focused on voters and media coverage in Charlotte, North Carolina, which was selected for its distance—and lack of press influence—from other metropolitan areas. Structured as a panel study, Shaw and McCombs (1977) conducted interviews with voters in June, October, and November of 1972, and analyzed media coverage of the 1972 U.S. presidential election in the Charlotte Observer, the only major newspaper in the area, and three evening television network broadcasts. As in the 1972 study, Shaw and McCombs (1977) focused on voters’ views toward issues and asked voters to rank issues in order of importance. Using cross-lagged correlations, they found the strongest relationship between media coverage in June and the voter’s agenda in October, suggesting that the media indeed influence the public’s agenda, particularly over time as media coverage of issues accumulates (Shaw & McCombs, 1977).

In addition, Shaw and McCombs (1977) found that newspapers and television differ in their roles when agenda setting is concerned. Initially, in June, the newspaper largely matched the voters’ issue concerns (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). And, from June to October, the newspaper had more influence over voters’ perceptions of key issues than did the television news broadcasts (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). In October, however, voter concerns more strongly matched the
television news broadcasts than they did the newspapers (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). As Shaw and McCombs note, “[Our analyses] indicate public influence on the TV agendas across time. In other words, these media catch up with, adjust their agenda to fit the agenda of their audience,” whereas “newspapers perform more of an initiating role in public opinion” (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, p. 97). Why the difference? Newspapers have greater space and are able to “pick up” and cover issues—and influence public opinion of those issues—before issues become prominent, whereas TV news presentations act more like the front pages of newspapers, only allotting space to those issues which are already prominent in the public eye (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, p. 98). Because of this, Shaw and McCombs (1977) claim that “newspapers play the lead role in [the] initial presentation of issues to the public” (p. 98).

Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) later strengthened the case for agenda setting when they published an experimental study looking at the effects of altered newscasts on voters’ perceptions of key issues. In that study, subjects were exposed to newscasts in which some stories were deleted and replaced with others emphasizing a particular issue, and the subjects were later asked to rank a set of issues, including those covered in the newscasts, in order of importance (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982). Overall, the researchers found that groups ranked issues higher when they were exposed to those issues more heavily in the newscasts (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982). Subsequent experiments by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) provided further evidence for agenda setting, showing that the broadcast media’s priorities became viewers’ priorities for a variety of issues and under a variety of conditions.

Even today—in a time when scholars have questioned the influence of traditional news media on public opinion in light of the ever-growing use of social media and online news outlets—studies still show agenda setting effects from traditional media (Bennett & Iyengar,
Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; McCombs et al., 2011; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Takeshita, 2005). Shehata and Strömbäck (2013), for example, conducted a media content analysis and panel survey to investigate agenda setting effects in this media-saturated, modern era, accounting for partisan preferences and individual use of online news media in the process. While they expected to find little influence by traditional news media on the public’s perception of the most important political issues of the day, they instead found strong supporting evidence for agenda setting effects as described by McCombs nearly four decades prior (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013).

In Shehata and Strömbäck’s study (2013), the agenda of the more traditional newspapers and television stations aligned strongly with the public’s agenda at both the individual and aggregate levels, and political preferences had no effect on those issues that the public identified as most important. The only exception they found was with regular consumers of online news content; for this group, traditional media outlets had little effect on those issues that they identified as most important (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). As Shehata and Strömbäck said, “Although we cannot rule out that…further down the road [we] will enter a new era of minimal effects, we can rule out the notion that a generalized ‘we’ at this stage have done so. The fact that we found clear agenda-setting effects on both the aggregate and individual levels of analysis instead strengthens the agenda-setting hypothesis” (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013, p. 252).

While McCombs and Shaw (1977) focused primarily on the media’s ability to influence public opinion, studies by other researchers have focused on the relationships between the media’s agenda, the public’s agenda, and the policy or political agenda, and the ability of those agendas to influence political processes (Cobb & Elder, 1972; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Erikson, Wright, & McIver, 1993; Gonzenbach, W., 1992; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Reeves,
Numerous researchers (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984; Linsky, 1986; Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Rogers & Dearing, 1996; and Trumbo, 1995) have noted that agenda setting is not simply a one-way process leading from the media to the public to policy. Rather, agenda setting is recursive—all three can influence one another at different times and for different reasons (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Cook et al. (1983), for example, demonstrated that policy isn’t always tied directly to public opinion; rather, policy can be influenced solely by the media. Cook et al. (1983) demonstrated this through interviews with legislators and other government officials before and after a nationally televised program on fraud and corruption in home health care. In both the pre- and post-interviews, the policymakers were asked about a range of social issues, including home health care, and how important those issues were to themselves and the public (Cook et al., 1983). The perceived importance of home health care grew significantly among the government officials who had seen or heard about the news program (Cook et al., 1983). But not only did the officials perceive the issue to be more important; they also thought the public perceived the issue to be more important, and the officials who saw or heard about the program were significantly more likely to advocate for policy changes related to home health care (Cook et al., 1983).

Likewise, Linsky (1986) demonstrated through six case studies that policymakers often infer public opinion from the media; that is, they consider prominent media coverage of an issue as an indication that the public views the issue as important, and policymakers often set their agendas accordingly.

As agenda setting has continued to be studied, researchers have also investigated agenda setting effects at deeper levels, studying not just issues, but components of issues and their effects on perception. McCombs describes this deeper level of agenda setting as second-level
agenda setting, which he says affects public perception of the importance of attributes of issues, or “those characteristics and properties that fill out the picture” of the issue (McCombs et al., 1997, p. 704). And just as the public assigns importance to issues, so do they assign importance to attributes of issues (McCombs et al., 1997). He explains that the media influence public opinion through “perspectives and frames” that “draw attention to certain attributes and away from others,” causing the public to think and talk about the issue in those terms (McCombs et al., 1997, p. 704). As Balmas and Sheafer note (2010), second-level agenda setting expands on first-level agenda setting by suggesting that the media not only tell us what issues to think about, but also how to think about those issues.

Because second-level agenda setting focuses on how issues are presented by the media, it is often compared to the concept of framing, which Entman (1993) describes as the process of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). Other scholars describe framing similarly, saying that in selecting and emphasizing some aspects of an issue at the expense of others, framing organizes public thought and influences the ways in which the public thinks about an issue and how the issue should be interpreted (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Tankard et al. 1991).

Some scholars, McCombs (2004) included, view framing as an extension of agenda setting, although others have disagreed widely on the matter (Entman, 1993; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002; McCombs et al., 1997; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). McCombs (2004) differentiates between second-level agenda setting and framing by saying that attributes and frames fall on a micro-macro continuum, with frames falling on the macro end of the continuum.
As McCombs says, a frame is an attribute, but not all attributes are frames because frames encompass “a number of lower level attributes” (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001, p. 74).

McCombs references Takeshita’s study of the Japanese economy as an example (McCombs, 2004; Takeshita, 2002). Takeshita identified attributes used by the media to describe the country’s economic difficulties, but he also identified four macro-level frames—breakdowns in institutional values, loss of individual value, ambiguous and confusing situations, and social conflicts—that each encompassed a number of the lower-level attributes (Takeshita, 2002). The amount of newspaper articles referencing these micro- and macro-level attributes was compared to survey data describing the importance the public placed on these attributes (Takeshita, 2002). Takeshita found moderately strong correlations between the newspaper’s agenda and the public’s agenda considering the micro-level attributes (with correlations ranging from +0.54 to +0.64), and very strong correlations between the newspaper’s agenda and the public’s agenda considering the macro-level attributes (with correlations ranging between +0.80 and +1.00).

As McCombs says, this differentiation between micro- and macro-level attributes is important because frames, those macro-level attributes, have the “power to structure thought, to shape how we think about public issues” by suggesting “what is relevant and irrelevant” and actively promoting a certain interpretation and evaluation of the issue being described—and presumably, a certain policy recommendation to remedy the problem (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). When this occurs, framing has the power to influence not only what issues are addressed through policy, but precisely how they are addressed through policy. For the purposes of this study, McCombs’ definition of a “frame” is used to differentiate between micro-level attributes and macro-level frames organizing groups of lower-level attributes.
While no studies have focused on agenda setting effects with regard to education specifically, studies have been published on the media’s effect on education policy generally (Anderson, 2007; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Smith et al., 2004). Berliner and Biddle (1995), for example, argue that media were in part responsible for making the public believe in the “manufactured crisis” facing public education as stated by Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, when in fact U.S. schools weren’t failing in the ways that politicians led the media and the public to believe. More recently, studies have shown that the media oversimplify educational problems and more often regurgitate the issues “as framed by the candidates” rather than investigate educational issues in depth or inform the public about alternate perspectives, such as those of educators (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002).

And yet politicians influence on the media—and the media’s influence on the public and subsequent influence education policy—has been strong. Perhaps the most notable example of politicians and the media exerting influence on education policy occurred during President George W. Bush’s tenure, when the Houston Independent School District was featured prominently by the media as a rare success story of a district drastically reducing dropout rates by implementing high-stakes standardized testing (Anderson, 2007). In reality, the district had manipulated the data to make its dropout rate appear lower than it was, but by the time cover-up was discovered, the damage to public opinion and education policy had already been done (Anderson, 2007). As Anderson said, “[Secretary of Education] Rod Paige, with the help of President Bush and key Democrats, had already moved the Texas miracle onto the national agenda through bipartisan passage of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. The later debunking of the Houston miracle was too late to have an effect on the legislation” (Anderson, 2007, p.106-107). The point of contention, as Berliner and Biddle (1995) note, isn’t
whether the U.S. education system needs help—in fact, most scholars agree that change of some sort is needed—but rather what the key problems are and how they should be addressed through policy. Given the media’s long history of influence over such matters, contemporary agenda setting research is all the more important.

Agenda setting continues to provide insight into how the media influence policy, and it continues to be applied to a wide variety of contemporary social issues. No research has been conducted on agenda setting’s effects on public education, and this study aims to fill that gap. Regarding Common Core, especially, agenda setting is uniquely positioned to guide a comparative analysis of differing policy outcomes. Whereas, historically, most education reforms were either mandated federally—and therefore nearly identical state-to-state—or implemented in a variety of ways dictated entirely by states’ differing school boards, Common Core fits neither description. Rather, Common Core represents a common set of reforms developed and supported by states’ governors and superintendents/commissioners/secretaries of education, and implemented by nearly all 50 states in a very similar fashion, yet public and policy reaction has varied. Agenda setting could help explain that variance.

**Research Questions**

To that end, this study looks to address the following questions:

1. How has the media’s agenda shaped policy agenda, if at all, regarding Common Core in Oklahoma and New Mexico?
   a. On which agenda did Common Core appear first?
   b. Did increases in Common Core on the media’s agenda precede increases in Common Core on the policy agenda?
2. How has the policy agenda shaped the media’s agenda, if at all, regarding Common Core in Oklahoma and New Mexico?
   
a. On which agenda did Common Core appear first?
   b. Did increases in Common Core on the policy agenda precede increases in Common Core on the media’s agenda?

3. How has Common Core been framed in the media in Oklahoma and New Mexico, and are there similarities or differences between the two states?
   
a. Are there common attributes between the two states?
   b. Are there unique attributes to either state?

All three questions address whether differences in media coverage could have contributed to unique policy agendas in each state.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Three content analyses of newspaper articles appearing from 2010 to 2016 were conducted for this study. First, a content analysis was conducted using the largest daily circulation newspapers in both Oklahoma and New Mexico. Oklahoma and New Mexico were chosen because of the stark differences in how Common Core fare politically in each state, but also because of their geographic and other similarities. For instance, both states have consistently ranked among the lowest in quality of education in the United States, ranking 45 or below each of the last three years, (Education Week, 2016; Education Week, 2017; Education Week, 2018), and both states have been led by Republican, female governors since 2011 (National Governors Association, 2018). Both states also have similar median household incomes, persons living below the poverty line, and percentages of minority populations living within them, although New Mexico has a significantly percentage of Hispanics (IndexMundi, 2018).

In Oklahoma, articles from The Oklahoman and Tulsa World were analyzed. In New Mexico, articles from the Albuquerque Journal, the Santa Fe New Mexican, and the Las Cruces Sun-News were analyzed. Only articles that referred to the Common Core State Standards were considered. Data were gathered on the number of articles referring to Common Core published by each newspaper monthly. The data from each of the newspapers were combined for each state to determine an aggregate monthly frequency of media coverage of Common Core in each state. Those combined frequencies were then be plotted over time. Data were collected through March
2016, with articles referencing Common Core appearing for the first time ever in both states in the spring of 2010.

Next, data were gathered on bills under discussion and laws passed by each state legislature during the same time period. Bills under discussion and bills signed into law were found by searching the phrase “Common Core” in the New Mexico Legislature’s bill finder/keyword search and the Oklahoma State Legislature’s text of measures search function online. Only bills and laws referencing Common Core were considered. Two separate types of data were collected—first, the number of bills appearing on each legislature’s agenda during one-month periods, and second, the number of times any bills referencing Common Core were discussed or moved forward through legislative action. In the first analysis, each bill was counted only once no matter how many times it appeared on the agenda during that time period. In the second analysis, each bill was counted every time it appeared on the agenda, providing a bigger-picture view of how often Common Core was discussed during that legislative session. These data were also plotted over time and compared to the frequency and timeline of media coverage analyzed previously. A descriptive analysis was conducted to determine whether the media set the policy agenda, or vice-versa, in each state.

Lastly, a more in-depth content analysis was conducted on articles referencing Common Core in The Oklahoman and the Albuquerque Journal, the largest circulation newspapers in each state. All articles referencing Common Core, 374 in total, were analyzed. This last content analysis identified attributes and frames of Common Core as presented in the media. Attributes were defined as any characteristic used to describe Common Core, whether objective or subjective, and frames were identified from those attributes as macro-level ways of describing Common Core. Attributes were counted once per article in which they are mentioned, and the
frequencies of each attribute were aggregated to determine which attributes received the most media coverage. A comparative analysis of the framing of Common Core in each state was conducted to determine whether there were differences in framing between the two states. To gather further insight, the source of each article was also coded, noting whether the article was written by a staff writer, contributor, the newspaper’s editorial board, or the Associated Press.

This last content analysis was conducted independently by three coders. Because this content analysis involved coding all articles published in the given time frame—so the coders were unable to be trained on articles outside of the coding sample—coders were trained in-depth on a small number of articles selected based on the high number of attributes appearing in those article. Coders first coded the articles independently, and then disagreements between attributes were discussed in depth. Because agenda setting assumes a cumulative effect on the general public after repeated exposure to an attribute, coders were instructed to think and code like an average member of the public reading a newspaper. Namely, they were instructed to mark the attribute if they suspected an average reader would also identify that attribute. Or as Neuendorf might say, they were asked to code “manifest” rather than “latent” content (170).

Two measures of intercoder reliability, Fleiss’ kappa and percent agreement, were used to determine the reliability of each attribute (Fleiss, 1971). Fleiss’ kappa was selected for its ability to calculate reliability between three or more coders while accounting for agreement expected by chance (Fleiss, 1971) while percent agreement was used as a secondary measure of reliability when Fleiss’ kappa couldn’t be calculated (when there was no variability and coders agreed 100 percent of the time, for example) or when Fleiss’ kappa was strongly impacted by small degrees of variability. Fifty randomly selected articles, or 13 percent of the total, were coded independently by all three coders. Of the 52 total attributes, 18 attributes achieved moderate to
almost perfect agreement between the coders (.442 to 1); six achieved fair agreement (.242 to .37); three achieved slight agreement (.076 to .172); and 16 achieved poor agreement (-.034 to -.007) according to Landis and Koch’s method for interpreting Fleiss’ kappa (1977). It’s important to note, however, that percent agreement was high for all attributes (ranging from .72 to 100 and averaging 95.67) and especially high for attributes achieving poor agreement using Fleiss’ kappa (with percent agreement ranging from 93.33 to 98.67). This indicates that Fleiss’ kappa was negatively impacted by small amounts of variability, despite the fact that coders were largely in agreement. Fleiss’ kappa was unable to be calculated for an additional nine attributes because of zero variability; for these attributes, coders agreed 100 percent of the time. Fleiss’ kappa and percent agreement statistics for each attribute are listed in table 1. Intercoder reliability was not calculated for the article’s source because there was no room for disagreement between the coders given that sources’ roles were clearly labeled.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

First-Level Agenda Setting

The first part of this study examines the presence of Common Core on the media and legislative agendas in Oklahoma and New Mexico from 2010 to 2016. Figures 1 and 2 show media coverage and bills discussed in Oklahoma, and Figures 3 and 4 show media coverage and bills discussed in New Mexico. A total of 606 newspaper articles referencing Common Core were found in Oklahoma (197 in *The Oklahoman* and 409 in *Tulsa World*). A total of 437 newspaper articles referencing Common Core were found in New Mexico (177 in *Albuquerque Journal*, 159 in *Santa Fe New Mexican*, and 101 in *Las Cruces Sun-News*). Common Core’s presence on the legislative agendas is shown two ways. Figures 1 and 3 include bills referencing Common Core, which are shown only once per legislative session. Figures 2 and 4 include bills referencing Common Core every time they appeared on their respective legislative agendas, i.e., every time they were discussed officially.

In Oklahoma, media coverage of Common Core began nearly a year before Common Core appeared on the legislative agenda, with the first newspaper article appearing in *The Oklahoman* in April 2010 (see figures 1 and 2). Fifteen articles, or 2.5 percent of the total, appeared in Oklahoma newspapers before Common Core was discussed in a legislative session. The first bill referencing Common Core appeared in January 2011, and two more followed before the session ended in May 2011. Seven newspaper articles, or a 1.2 percent, appeared during the session. No articles appeared immediately following the 2011 session. In the 2012
session, only two bills were discussed, each only once in January. Oklahoma newspapers published four articles on Common Core during that month.

Media coverage remained steady, continuing to average 1.4 articles per month until January 2013, when media coverage and legislative action began increasing and spiked later that year. A total of 105 newspaper articles on Common Core, or 17 percent, appeared in 2013, more than double the amount, 49, that had appeared from 2010 through 2012. Ten pieces of legislation regarding Common Core were discussed during the 2013 session, with newspaper articles appearing before, during, and after the session. The majority of the articles, 54, appeared in the four months immediately following the legislative session.

Media coverage reached an all-time high in 2014 with 363 articles on Common Core, more than triple the amount that had appeared in 2013 and nearly 60 percent of the total. Media coverage began increasing in December 2013, immediately prior to the 2014 legislative session, during which nine pieces of legislation on Common Core were discussed 26 times. Approximately 41 percent, or 150 of the 363 articles, were published during the five-month legislative session, and 52 percent were published in the five months immediately following, peaking at 64 articles in June 2014. Media coverage remained elevated in early 2015 near the beginning of the 2015 legislative session, but no bills on Common Core were discussed. Sixty articles, or 10 percent, were published from March 2015 through February 2016.

In New Mexico, Common Core appeared on the legislative agenda before it appeared in newspapers, with the first bill on Common Core discussed in February 2010. Media coverage began in May 2010, totaling 11 articles, or about one article every other month, through December 2011. No bills appeared on the legislative agenda during the 2011 session.
In 2012, media coverage of Common Core began increasing just prior to the 2012 session, during which four pieces of legislation were discussed a total of 15 times. A total of six newspaper articles were published during the session, and 62 articles, or 14 percent, were published throughout the rest of the year.

Media coverage remained elevated, averaging eight articles per month, in the months just prior to the 2013 legislative session. Bills and other pieces of legislation rose once more during the 2013 session, during which nine bills were discussed 17 times. Media coverage dropped immediately following, but began increasing in June and reached double-digits for the first time in August. Sixty articles, or 14 percent, were published in the five months leading up to the 2014 legislative session, which saw the largest amount of legislation on Common Core. During the 2014 session, 13 bills were discussed 35 times. Media coverage remained elevated throughout 2014, totaling 137 articles, or 31 percent. Media coverage peaked during the 2015 legislative session. While seven bills were discussed 19 times, media coverage peaked at 49 articles, or 11 percent, within a two-month period. Media coverage has continued steadily, totaling 75 articles, an average of 6.8 articles per month or 17 percent of the total, since then.

**Second-level Agenda Setting**

The second part of this study examines the ways that Common Core was characterized by Oklahoma and New Mexico media outlets from 2010 to 2016. This second part looks not at the frequency of Common Core itself, but at the frequency of attributes and frames used to describe it. Results are based on all articles referencing Common Core published in the largest circulation newspapers in each state through 2016. Figures 5 shows the attributes that were used to characterize Common Core in *The Oklahoman* from 2010 through 2016. A total of 205 articles from this newspaper were analyzed. Figure 6 shows the attributes that were used to characterize
Common Core in the *Albuquerque Journal* from 2010 through 2016. A total of 169 articles referencing Common Core were analyzed.

In both Oklahoma and New Mexico, Common Core was described the most as “academic standards” (see figures 5 and 6). In Oklahoma, 176 of the 593 characterizations of Common Core, or 29.7 percent, were such. In New Mexico, 167 of the 706 characterizations of Common Core, or 23.7 percent, were such. Otherwise, each state’s framing of Common Core differed considerably.

In Oklahoma, the next highest attribute used to characterize Common Core was “federal control over state issues,” an emotionally charged characterization linked to political ideology (see figure 5). This characterization was found 49 times and accounts for 8.3 percent of the total. Third most was “high/rigorous standards” at 6.6 percent, followed by “national standards” at 4.9 percent and “prepares students for college/careers” at 4.6 percent. Each of the other attributes appeared in fewer than 4 percent of the articles. Attributes unique to Oklahoma that were not found in the New Mexico analysis include “against values/principles,” “liberal/social agenda,” “lower standards,” “positive reform,” “privacy concerns over data,” and “stifles innovation/creativity.”

In New Mexico, the second highest attribute used to characterize Common Core was “testing” at 88 characterizations, or 12.5 percent of the total (see figure 6). Third most was “national standards” at 7.1 percent, followed by “linked to teacher evaluations” at 6.3 percent and “state initiative” at 4.7 percent. Each of the other attributes appeared in fewer than 4 percent of the articles. Attributes unique to New Mexico that were not found in the Oklahoma analysis include “asks students to explain/justify,” “based on research,” “challenging to implement,”
“fewer barriers between subjects,” “fewer topics,” “flexible,” “hands-on,” “integrate unique cultures,” “more focused,” and “real-world.”

At the macro-level, “standards” was the frame most used to describe Common Core in both Oklahoma and New Mexico (see figures 7 and 8). Attributes referring to “standards” account for 248, or 41.8 percent, of the total in Oklahoma and 240, or 34 percent, of the total in New Mexico. The second most-used frame in Oklahoma was “federally controlled” at 19.6 percent, whereas the second most-used frame in New Mexico was “assessment/accountability tool” at 25.8 percent.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

In Oklahoma, although media coverage initially appeared before legislative action, results indicate that Oklahoma media outlets largely followed the legislative agenda. Media coverage rose during legislative sessions in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014 and spiked significantly immediately following the 2014 legislative session. Media coverage also remained elevated following the 2012, 2013, and 2014 sessions. The only year in which media coverage spiked immediately prior to a legislative session was 2015, yet no bills involving Common Core appeared on the legislative agenda. In other words, results indicate that, in Oklahoma, the policy agenda set the media agenda, while the media agenda had little to no effect on the policy agenda.

In New Mexico, the opposite appears to be true. Although Common Core appeared on the legislative agenda initially, media coverage often rose in the months prior to legislative sessions. Media coverage increased immediately prior to legislative sessions in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2016. In 2014, media coverage remained elevated throughout and peaked in February 2015 during the 2015 legislative session. By and large, the media agenda set the policy agenda regarding Common Core in New Mexico, although it could be argued that the policy agenda also set the media agenda immediately following legislative sessions in 2014 and 2015, when media coverage rose or remained high immediately following.

There also appear to be significant differences in how Common Core was framed by the media in each state. Although both media outlets characterized Common Core most as “academic standards,” and although both states characterized Common Core similarly in some
instances, their unique characterizations of Common Core differed considerably. In Oklahoma, unique characterizations of Common Core were often negative or linked to political ideology. These descriptions unique to Oklahoma included “against values/principles,” “liberal/social agenda,” “lower standards,” “privacy concern over data,” and “stifles innovation/creativity,” which together accounted for 2.7 percent of the total characterizations.

In contrast, attributes of Common Core unique to New Mexico were largely neutral and linked to either the content of the standards or to technical concerns involved in implementing them. Content-specific descriptions unique to New Mexico included “asks students to explain/justify,” “based on research,” “fewer barriers between subjects,” “fewer topics,” “hands-on,” “integrate unique cultures,” “more focused,” and “real-world.” Together, these attributes accounted for 38 characterizations, or 5.4 percent, the fifth highest of any single set of characterizations. Also unique to New Mexico were technical concerns, including “challenging to implement” and “flexible.” These attributes accounted for 7 characterizations, or 1 percent.

In considering other factors that could have influenced the differing policy outcomes in each state, none appear to have exerted as large of an influence as did agenda setting. It could be argued, for example, that the data are strong examples of media dependency—the idea that the public relies on the media for a variety of needs, including information about political issues (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). And while media dependency certainly could have played a role, its role only strengthens the case for agenda setting, a theory which is based on the idea that the public relies on the media to keep them informed of political affairs and to help prioritize the issues that are most important.

One might also wonder whether party and/or national politics could have played a role. While the states’ legislatures certainly differed in composition from 2011 to 2016—with
Oklahoma’s state legislature including a larger percentage of Republicans than New Mexico’s—
it’s important to note that New Mexico’s state legislature has become increasingly more
Republican since 2010, with the Senate generally comprising of 36 to 43 percent Republicans
and the House differing in majority by a mere four to six seats each year (New Mexico
Legislature, n.d.; “Party control of Oklahoma state government,” n.d.). In fact, New Mexico’s
House of Representatives actually had more Republicans than Democrats in both 2015 and 2016
(New Mexico Legislature, n.d.). Additionally, each state has been led by a single Republican
female governor since 2011 (“Current governors,” n.d.). So while party politics could have
played some part, its role was likely minimal.

Nationally, the 2012 presidential election occurred during the timeframe of this study,
and while Common Core was addressed by the candidates, it was often done so secondarily. For
example, Common Core was often discussed in reference to then-President Barack Obama’s
Race to the Top challenge, which essentially replaced the Bush-era No Child Left Behind Act
emphasizing school curricula and standardized testing (Toppo, 2012). Not only did Race to the
Top offer states waivers from No Child Left Behind in exchange for meeting certain educational
criteria (criteria which included adopting any set of “rigorous college- and career-ready
standards”), but it also offered states monetary incentives through several rounds of
competitions, during which states could submit proposals to receive education-related grants
(“Myths and facts,” n.d.; The White House President Barack Obama, n.d.). In selecting which
proposals to fund, the U.S. Department of Education “gave competitive advantage to Race to the
Top applicants that demonstrated that they had or planned to adopt college- and career-ready
standards for all students,” which included—but did not have to be—Common Core (“Myths and
facts,” n.d.). Evidence of these federal programs trickling into the conversation on Common
Core appears in the data collected for the study. Both No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were mentioned by the media in both states. But although both Oklahoma and New Mexico applied for Race to the Top grants, neither state received any funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

There are several implications for this research. First and foremost, this study supports the idea that the media continue to play a strong role in influencing political outcomes, as was the case with the “manufactured crisis” facing education in the 1980s and 1990s. Knowing this, an immense amount of responsibility falls to the media to cover social reforms in detail, rather than just scratch the surface to chronicle what the public thinks about them. Looking more in depth at the articles presented in this study, the New Mexico media took the time to visit classrooms and write detailed feature articles on what Common Core looked like on practical level—how it influenced what and how students learned. In contrast, the Oklahoma media merely recounted the arguments for or against Common Core. The resulting conversations surrounding Common Core and differing political outcomes are hardly coincidental.

Regarding agenda setting and education research, this study supports the studies of Cook et al. (1983) and Linksy (1986), which argue that the media have the potential to influence policy directly without relying on public opinion as a go-between. Additionally, researchers in education can use this study as an example of how to strengthen the causal relationship between the media and education reforms.

**Conclusion**

Analyses of media coverage and legislative action regarding Common Core in Oklahoma and New Mexico indicate that agenda setting likely played a role in the different policy outcomes of each state. In Oklahoma, where the policy agenda set the media agenda and where
media coverage of Common Core tended to be uniquely negative and linked to political ideology, Common Core was repealed. In New Mexico, where the media agenda set the policy agenda and where media coverage of Common Core tended to be uniquely neutral and linked to content and technical concerns, Common Core has been supported.

This study was limited in that legislative content was limited solely to the months in which the legislatures met. With additional content, cross-lagged correlations could have been used to confirm relationships between the media’s agenda and the policy agenda across time. For example, future research could include a content analysis of press releases and other public relations documents released by state legislators when not in legislative session. This additional content could help provide a stronger causal link between the media and policy agendas in both places. More research should be done to better determine the extent that agenda setting can explain differences in perception and policy outcomes at state levels.
REFERENCES


31


32


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Fleiss kappa</th>
<th>Percent agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic standards</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>72.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability measure</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>98.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against values/principles</td>
<td>undefined</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows comparable achievement</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>97.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks students to explain/justify</td>
<td>undefined</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on research</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>98.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging to implement</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>97.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent across states</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>94.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled by big business</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>98.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost concerns</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>97.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>0.852</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed by state officials</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>88.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal control over state issues</td>
<td>0.684</td>
<td>90.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer barriers between subjects</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer topics</td>
<td>0.486</td>
<td>97.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>94.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater depth</td>
<td>0.868</td>
<td>98.667</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hands-on</td>
<td>undefined</td>
<td>100.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>High/rigorous standards</td>
<td>0.721</td>
<td>92.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher learning/achievement</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>94.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrates unique cultures</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internationally competitive</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal/social agenda</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>98.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked to teacher evaluations</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>97.333</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locally implemented</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>More focused</td>
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<td>More nonfiction</td>
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<td>National standards</td>
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<td>No Child Left Behind waiver</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Race to the Top/federal funding</td>
<td>0.786</td>
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<td>Reading/writing focused</td>
<td>0.793</td>
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<td>Real-world</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills/knowledge, not pedagogy</td>
<td>undefined</td>
<td>100.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State initiative</td>
<td>0.336</td>
<td>84.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stifles innovation/creativity</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>98.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported by federal government</td>
<td>0.242</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supported locally</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>97.333</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher training/support</td>
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<td>Testing</td>
<td>0.856</td>
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<tr>
<td>Too challenging</td>
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<td>Underfunded</td>
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<td>Way to improve achievement</td>
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<td>97.333</td>
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Figure 1. Media coverage and bills regarding Common Core in Oklahoma, 2010-2016. (NewsBank, inc., 2016; Oklahoma Legislature, 2016)
Figure 2. Media coverage and legislative action regarding Common Core in Oklahoma, 2010-2016. (NewsBank, inc., 2016; Oklahoma Legislature, 2016)
Figure 3. Media coverage and bills regarding Common Core in New Mexico, 2010-2016. (New Mexico Legislature, 2016; NewsBank, inc., 2017)
Figure 4. Media coverage and legislative action regarding Common Core in New Mexico, 2010-2016. (New Mexico Legislature, 2016; NewsBank, inc., 2017)
Figure 5. Attributes of Common Core in The Oklahoman, 2010-2016. (NewsBank, inc., 2017)
Figure 6. Attributes of Common Core in the *Albuquerque Journal*, 2010-2016. (NewsBank, inc., 2017)
Figure 7. Frames of Common Core in *The Oklahoman*, 2010-2016. (NewsBank, inc., 2017)
Figure 8. Frames of Common Core in the *Albuquerque Journal*, 2010-2016. (NewsBank, inc., 2017)