The Political Rhetoric of Universal Pre-K:
Lessons from Boston and New York City

Jessica Moskowitz
Sociology of Education
New York University
May 2016
Contents

Contents .................................................................................................................................................................. 2

I. Introduction ...................................................................................................................................................... 4

II. Background and Literature Review........................................................................................................... 8
    Pre-K Research and the Current Climate of Early Education ...................................................................... 8
    Why is there so much focus on pre-K interventions? ......................................................................................... 8
    Does pre-K actually make a difference? ........................................................................................................... 9
    What does pre-K look like on a national scale? ............................................................................................... 11
    Political Rhetoric and its Implications ........................................................................................................ 13
    What is political rhetoric? ............................................................................................................................... 13
    Why does political rhetoric matter to program implementation? ................................................................. 15
    What are the current trends in rhetoric surrounding UPK policy? ............................................................. 17
    The Present Study ........................................................................................................................................ 19

III. City Overview ............................................................................................................................................. 20
    Why focus on Boston and New York City? ...................................................................................................... 20
    Boston's K1 .................................................................................................................................................... 20
    Context and UPK program components ......................................................................................................... 20
    Program expansion .......................................................................................................................................... 22
    Program leadership ......................................................................................................................................... 23
    New York City's Pre-K For All ...................................................................................................................... 24
    Context and UPK program components ......................................................................................................... 24
    Program expansion .......................................................................................................................................... 26
    Program Leadership ....................................................................................................................................... 27
    Summary ......................................................................................................................................................... 28

IV. Rhetorical Theme #1: Student Outcomes and Program Purpose ............................................................ 30
    Boston: An Academic Focus ......................................................................................................................... 30
    K1 versus pre-K: Program name symbolism .................................................................................................. 31
    Focus on “formal” school readiness .............................................................................................................. 32
    Learners first .................................................................................................................................................. 33
    New York City: Seeking Success in School and Beyond ............................................................................. 33
    “In school and in life” ................................................................................................................................... 34
    “Opportunity starts now” ............................................................................................................................. 35
    Dramatic language of social mobility ........................................................................................................... 36
    Summary ......................................................................................................................................................... 37

V. Rhetorical Theme #2: Reach and Impact of Program .............................................................................. 39
    Boston: Visions of Individual Achievement ................................................................................................. 39
    ‘Focus on Children’ ....................................................................................................................................... 40
    Utilization of neurological arguments ........................................................................................................... 41
    Eliminating gaps serve to increase individual achievement ......................................................................... 42
    New York City: Family and Community Impact ......................................................................................... 43
    “A win for parents” ...................................................................................................................................... 43
    Community movement .................................................................................................................................. 44
    Moral obligation to close the achievement gap ............................................................................................ 45
    Summary ......................................................................................................................................................... 46
VI. Connecting Rhetoric and Implementation ................................................................. 49
    Boston: The “Pre-K” in UPK .................................................................................. 49
        Teacher focus on quality instruction ............................................................... 50
        Slow expansion timeline .................................................................................. 51
        Measured push into community organizations .............................................. 52
    New York City: The “Universal” in UPK ............................................................... 53
        Student focus on enrollment and program diversity ...................................... 53
        Urgent expansion timeline ............................................................................. 55
        Immediate expansion into community organizations .................................... 56
    Summary .................................................................................................................. 56

VII. Conclusions .......................................................................................................... 59
    How do the cities differ, and why? .................................................................... 59
        Differences in political nature ........................................................................ 60
        Differences in chronology .............................................................................. 62
        Differences in size ............................................................................................ 64
    Rhetoric’s Role: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Reality ......................................... 64
    Future Research ..................................................................................................... 66

Appendix ...................................................................................................................... 69

References ................................................................................................................... 71
I. Introduction

Early childhood education is an issue at the forefront of the news today, with pre-Kindergarten becoming one of the most significant movements in education of the last century. Politicians are increasingly running on campaign promises of expanded early education, capitalizing on the growing body of research on brain development, enhanced advocacy for child care funding by parents and businesses, and expanding understanding of the mechanisms of educational success (Watson, 2011, p. 10; Wright, 2011, p. 251). More and more philanthropies promote pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) in their fundraising efforts, and President Obama’s 2013 Preschool for All Initiative further pushed universal access to early education into the spotlight. On the surface, increasing access to and quality of early childhood education is a bipartisan win in an increasingly politically polarized country, but there remain a number of controversial details to consider. Politicians and early education leaders continue to debate questions of funding, curriculum, and whether programs should be targeted to serve students who meet an income eligibility requirement or be universal in access. It is imperative that these aspects be studied in order to design an effective pre-K program. In this paper, I will explore one particular nuance in the field: the language that politicians and educational leaders use to discuss universal pre-K. This analysis will allow for a richer understanding of how rhetoric guides policy, and of the potential for universal pre-K initiatives to reach their goals.

First, a note on relevant terminology. In academic literature and popular media alike, many different labels are used to describe early childhood programs, including pre-K, preschool, child care, nursery school, and early learning. Some researchers and advocates differentiate between these terms and some lump them together, which creates a challenge for both research evaluation and policy analysis. Even with a term as seemingly straightforward as universal pre-
K, slight differences in meaning abound. For example, “universal” may imply free services or affordable ones, and either voluntary or compulsory admission (Barnett, Brown & Shore, 2004, p. 11). “Pre-K” may refer to any type of care in the years before kindergarten but often emphasizes programs with curricula designed to enhance kindergarten readiness (Wong, 2014). In this paper, I will follow the example of a recent report to define *universal pre-K* or *UPK* as free “state-funded preschool programs that offer early childhood education to all qualified children during the year or years before kindergarten,” with age and residence as the only eligibility criteria set in place (Potter, 2015, p. 3). Regardless of the exact terminology selected, the abundance of names for these programs reveals just how politicized the topic of early education is. Further, the many lexical discussions highlight the power of language to frame the early education debate (Wong, 2014); these topics will be discussed in more detail in Part II.

Given the rising popularity of UPK programs and their high cost—New York City’s program, for example, costs $340 million annually (Potter, 2015, p. 7)—it is important that we understand the potentials and limitations of such initiatives. The immediate goals of a UPK program are likely to be the same regardless of which city or state designs the particular policy: to provide access to education to all four-year-old children. Yet, there may be differences in the broader vision of the administrations, and politicians often utilize distinct terminology to talk about similar UPK programs. These differences in rhetoric may manifest themselves in the particular elements of implementation, in turn impacting a program’s potential for success in reaching its specific goals. To this end, I explore the following research questions:

- How are the goals of a UPK policy expressed through political rhetoric?
- How is political rhetoric related to implementation of UPK policy?
- How does political rhetoric and UPK program implementation differ in two case studies: New York City and Boston?
To provide context for the current policies, in Part II, I will summarize past pre-K initiatives and their successes and challenges; I will also outline the role of rhetoric in the political conversation. For the remaining parts of my paper, I will ground my analysis in the UPK programs in Boston, which has been held up as a gold standard of high-quality public pre-K, and in New York City, which is making history with the scope of its program expansion in the country’s largest school system. After an overview of each city’s program in Part III, I will present two rhetorical themes evident in the UPK administrations’ language. In Part IV, I will discuss each city’s perspective on the purpose of pre-K, and in Part V, I will investigate each city’s vision for its impact. In Part VI, I will draw connections between the different types of rhetoric and the cities’ implementation plans. Finally, in Part VII, I will offer conclusions and propose future research in the field.

I will explore the rhetoric used by politicians and educational leaders to speak about UPK in each city by evaluating primary sources, including government documents, white papers, marketing information, and transcripts and videos from press conferences and interviews. I will analyze these texts and speeches for language, symbols, tone, and themes, and present them in connection to the implementation of each city’s policy. Education policy is a complex, multifaceted field, and given that both cities speak about multiple goals, I do not wish to portray either city as single-minded. Instead, in this paper, I will present a case for the rhetorical trends most often used by each city’s leadership. By studying how the issue of UPK is typically framed, we can better understand each intervention’s potential for success as the city defines it.

Overall, I will argue that Boston leaders employ an academic achievement rhetoric, concentrated on individual student success in school, which heightens their implementation focus on the “pre-Kindergarten” part of UPK and the quality of instruction. New York City
politicians, in parallel, utilize a *citywide equity rhetoric* to speak about their UPK program, which highlights its potential impact on school measures and beyond for students and the community, and intensifies their focus on implementing the “universal” part of UPK through the demographically diverse enrollment of students. I will also touch on the political and chronological differences in the two cases, in order to further analyze the goals and potentials of these UPK interventions. Figure 1 illustrates the direction of the present analysis.
II. Background and Literature Review

Pre-K Research and the Current Climate of Early Education

The increased political focus on early childhood education stems in part from a growing body of academic research on the developmental processes targeted in pre-K. Studies have highlighted neurological, economic, and resiliency mechanisms by which pre-K programs may be successful. While some evaluations find evidence for increased cognitive skills and broader societal effects, other assessments point to an improvement “fade-out.” Despite the continued debate over how to best implement early childhood programs, pre-K’s popularity has grown rapidly in the United States. In the following section, I review the current literature highlighting the potentials and limitations of pre-K, and survey the history of the country’s pre-K initiatives, in order to provide context for the present analysis.

Why is there so much focus on pre-K interventions?

Cycles of inequality begin in the very early stages of life, and access to quality early schooling has significant consequences for later mobility. The increased investment in early childhood enrichment, in both time and money, from upper income families directly contributes to the widening achievement gap between low- and high-income students (Johnson, 2014). Neuroscience research finds that early experiences have unique potential to influence later cognitive and social skills (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron & Shonkoff, 2006), as well as later economic success (Heckman, 2008). When children are very young, their neural circuits are the most plastic to set productive patterns; cross-cultural evidence suggests that this “sensitive
period” is greater than previously realized (LeVine, 2007). The preschool years are crucial for higher order executive functioning as “skill begets skill” (Duncan & Murnane, 2014, p. 55).

In addition, economic studies show that investment in early childhood is the most cost effective, as early intervention lowers the cost of later intervention, has no equity-efficiency tradeoff, and is the most efficient education policy option (Blair & Raver, 2012; Heckman, 2008; Knudsen et al., 2006). Cost-benefit analyses show the potential for large returns on each dollar invested in early childhood programs, ranging from $6.00 to $8.60 (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014); President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union cited a $7 figure (The White House, 2014). Finally, research from risk and resiliency models suggest that early childhood investment may have a greater impact on the outcomes of disadvantaged children. Studies show that early childhood programs may impact mechanisms of development to buffer the type of developmental dysfunction that is more likely to occur in poor households (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In addition, early education programs may have large impacts on children in special education and those who are English Language Learners (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Does pre-K actually make a difference?

Research is somewhat divided on the impact of pre-K. There is a rich literature of studies that finds that early education programs enhance both academic and non-academic outcomes. Preschool programs have been shown to add about a third of a year of learning time, as well as enhance social-emotional health (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Participants in one of the most-cited studies in pre-K literature, the High/Scope Perry Preschool program, completed higher levels of schooling and earned more income at age 27 than non-participants; participants were also less likely to have been arrested (Schweinhart, 2003). Pre-K programs have been shown to make
THE POLITICAL RHETORIC OF UNIVERSAL PRE-K

particularly large improvements to the educational achievement, nutrition, and access to health care of low-income children, specifically (Zigler, Gilliam, Jones & Malakoff, 2006, p. 72).

However, some research finds evidence for a fade-out of such effects. Most recently, the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K study found that students who did not attend pre-K caught up to the pre-K group on all measures by the end of kindergarten, and even surpassed them on some measures by second grade (Lipsey, Farran & Hofer, 2015). Experts disagree over the exact causes of this fade-out, with some suggesting that pre-K simply accelerates cognitive development that would happen naturally, so students who do not attend eventually make up lost ground on their own. Others posit that subpar kindergarten and early elementary classes slow any gains began in pre-K (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). Current research in the field continues to explore both lasting pre-K effects and their fade-out, and popular media’s coverage of the issue swings to both extremes. Within six months, for example, The Atlantic published at least six articles about pre-K, including the critical “The Myth of Universal Childcare” (Bliss, 2015) and the more positive “The BiPartisan Appeal of Universal Pre-K” (Wong, 2015b).

The diverging paths of research on the question of pre-K’s impact highlight two important lessons. First, while hallmark early childhood studies such as Perry Preschool may help to support the expansion of public pre-K, experimental programs are often unlike real-world, large-scale ones (Rose, 2010, p. 220). For this reason, politicians and researchers should continue to evaluate contemporary programs, and must consider the risk of setting unrealistic expectations based solely on past small interventions (Zigler, 2010, p. 238). Second, whether a pre-K intervention will make a lasting difference in student outcomes may ultimately be determined by program quality, an overarching term that includes a number of factors (Kirp, 2015; Fuller, 2007, p. 214). While a program’s structural characteristics, including the number
of students in the class and the credentials of the teachers, are critical components for student success, the subtler process quality of child-teacher relationships and classroom pedagogy may have an even greater impact (Yoshikawa et al., 2013; Zigler, Gilliam, & Jones, 2006b, p. 109). In sum, when studying individual pre-K policies, particular attention should be paid to program expectations and to the details of implementation.

What does pre-K look like on a national scale?

Access to pre-K has been steadily increasing over the past half century. In 1965, less than 20% of children were enrolled in preschool; in 2005, enrollment was near 70% (Wright, 2011, p. 242). A recent report shows this figure holding steady over the past decade, with 66% of American 4-year-olds enrolled in pre-K today (OECD, 2015). Yet despite the increase in overall enrollment, early education remains a “non-system” and a “patchwork of programs” (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004) based on a “fragmented” approach of public and private initiatives (Rose, 2010, p. 5). The current structures leave about 2.5 million 4-year-olds without access to publicly funded programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). National figures highlight disparities along racial, income, and geographic lines in terms of access as well as quality (Wright, 2011, p. 242). For example, white children are more likely to attend preschool than non-white children, and children from families with incomes over $75,000 are twice as likely to attend than those with lower incomes (Pew Research Center, 2015). Data suggests that due to the high cost of private preschool programs, these attendance gaps are related to the availability of public pre-K (Zigler, Gilliam, Jones & Malakoff, 2006, p. 93).

The United States has a long history of targeted pre-K interventions, meaning that free programs have typically been offered only to those who meet income eligibility requirements.
The best known of these programs is Head Start, which has served more than 32 million children in its 50-year history (Head Start, 2015). Developed as part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, it is considered to be the beginning of the early education advocacy movement (Raikes, Chazan-Cohen, Love & Brooks-Gunn, 2010, p. 115). Other classic early intervention studies, such as Perry Preschool, are targeted programs as well. However, the push for a broader approach has expanded rapidly in recent years, with the UPK movement to provide services to all children, regardless of income eligibility, gaining popularity. UPK advocates seek to make early education a norm instead of a compensatory program for underserved children (Muenchow & Marsland, 2007, p. 102). The push for universal access has been compared to the campaign to expand the primary school system to include Kindergarten, a movement that took over a century to gain full momentum (Lawrence, 2011, p. 41; Fuller, 2007, p. 286). Political viability is high for UPK, as national polls show there is widespread public support for an increased state role in pre-K (Kagan & Friedlander, 2011, p. 43). A recent poll found support across gender, race, age, and political party, with 76% of those surveyed responding that UPK “would provide more children with a better chance to succeed” (Brownstein, 2016).

UPK advocates cite its ability to lower the stigma of receiving assistance as one promising feature. Further, because a universal system can reach middle- and working-class students who would otherwise miss a targeted program’s strict eligibility cutoffs, it has the potential to reach larger percentages of children in need (Barnett, 2011, p. 34). The socioeconomic integration possible in a UPK classroom may have additional developmental benefits for students from all backgrounds (Zigler, Gilliam, Jones & Malakoff, 2006, p. 100). Indeed, a comparison study found greater cognitive gains for students attending a universal program than those attending the targeted Head Start (Gormley, Phillips & Gayer,
2008). On a different note, with an increasing number of working parents today—mothers in particular—there is a growing trend for businesses to support the availability of free programs for all children (Zigler, Gilliam & Jones, 2006a, p. xxi). Today, eighteen states and the District of Columbia have a public pre-K program without income or other eligibility requirements, though only four of these—Washington, D.C., Florida, Oklahoma, and Vermont—enroll more than 70 percent of the state’s four-year olds (Potter, 2015, p. 11). The national climate, and the introduction of President Obama’s Preschool for All initiative, suggests that a movement towards universal early education is gaining traction.

**Political Rhetoric and its Implications**

While early education programs may be increasingly popular with voters on both sides of the party line, like many political issues, it is also the subject of dramatic promises. Rhetoric is crucial for politicians to both educate the public and to convince them of a certain viewpoint. By framing the issue in a strategic way, creating value-laden symbols, and targeting specific audiences, political rhetoric shapes the way that UPK policy is implemented. In the following section, I discuss the nature of political rhetoric and why it matters to the UPK conversation, highlighting two trends to provide background for the following case studies.

**What is political rhetoric?**

Political rhetoric is critical to policy change. Language is important for both “messaging and mobilizing” the public—that is, using a certain communication strategy first *informs* and then *persuades* voters and taxpayers on relevant issues (Gruendel & Aber, 2007, p. 45). Language is used to signal policy goals and relay political salience, urgency, and commitment to
ideals (p. 44). By defining where an administration is seeking to go, language helps develop a policy to get there (Zigler, Gilliam, Jones, 2006a, p. 19). In this way, “rhetoric articulates policy purposes and populations, and negotiates fits between them” (Asen, 2010, p. 129). Though scholars debate the exact power of political rhetoric, many agree that lofty, at times abstract language works in tandem with more concrete material resources in order to produce public policy (p. 126). Edelman’s (1998) theory of political spectacle theory holds that the political elite harness the emotional appeal of language in order to create a vivid “spectacle” to convince the public to vote for a certain policy. Thus, the way a political problem is spoken about, and the language used to describe and persuade, has the potential to set the course for future programs and investments: “the sales pitch can become the reality” (Fuller, 2007, p. 135).

Within the field of education, differences in political rhetoric often highlight differences in opinions over the goals of schooling. Educational historian Labaree (1997) argues that the problems in American education do not stem from classroom pedagogy or school structure; instead, the problems arise from political disagreement in goal setting (p. 40). That is, leaders alternately refer to students as citizens, future employees, or individual consumers, which means that the school system has come to simultaneously symbolize democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility (p. 41). Labaree maintains that schools are ineffective because they are pulled in these opposite directions (p. 70). Similarly, many researchers point to the groundbreaking publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 for advancing a new discourse in terms of educational goals, moving away from equality and towards accountability defined through test results. No Child Left Behind, signed into law by President Bush, further strengthened this rhetoric of accountability (Kuehl, 2012), before falling out of favor in recent years. These conflicting trends in goal-setting help to orient many of the recent debates in education, from
school testing requirements to the expansion of charter school networks, but even more fundamentally, they attest to the power of language to affect policy and public perception.

**Why does political rhetoric matter to program implementation?**

First, rhetoric creates a frame for political issues as well as policy goals. A frame is a set of internalized concepts and values that orients new information (Gruendel & Aber, 2007, p. 50). Frames are essentially the way a story is told, which impacts how individuals think about problems and solutions (FrameWorks Institute, 2016); they are the mental structures that shape the way we see the world (Lakoff, 2014, p. xi). Frames develop from the language and images chosen by policy advocates, as well as the media, an increasingly salient influence in today’s fast-paced “sound-bite” world (Gruendel & Aber, 2007, p. 55). As part of the cognitive unconscious, they are not accessed intentionally, but are apparent in their consequences for thinking (Lakoff, 2014, p. xii). Because the way an issue is framed creates powerful habits of thought, leaders must be strategic in selecting frames to advance their platforms (FrameWorks Institute, 2016). The targeted versus universal program debate highlights how framing impacts policy. For example, if politicians “tell the story” of persistent achievement gaps, then they will likely advocate for targeted interventions in order to bring up the test scores of lower performing groups. But if they describe the call to improve the performance of all children, universal programs may be the best alternative (Ceci & Papierno, 2005, p. 153). As such, frames help language carry and evoke primary ideas (Lakoff, 2014, p. 2).

Second, rhetoric matters because symbolic language is value-laden and creates an impression on its own. The controversy surrounding the naming of early education programs emphasizes how terminology itself is imbued with meaning. For example, when Pew Charitable
Trust began its advocacy work, officials deliberately selected “pre-K” instead of “child care” in order to cast the idea in terms of education and academic skills (Rose, 2010, p. 216). Indeed, there is consensus that “pre-K” can represent a solution to the country’s education problems, while “preschool” represents simply day care; thus, the naming of policy is itself a “political decision” (Wong, 2014). In another example of the power of words, shortly after President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union, *The Washington Post* compared two of his statements referencing pre-K, made within days of each other. One read, “Studies show students are more likely to…” while the other omitted the reference to the studies, stating that “students don’t just show up in kindergarten and first grade more prepared to learn, they’re also more likely to…” As Kessler (2013) explains, Obama dropped the word “studies” after receiving pushback that pre-K research remains inconclusive in order to adjust his statement from fact to opinion. This strategic omission attests to the power of words to create lasting symbols.

Third, rhetoric matters because it is designed to impact certain stakeholders. It is important to consider the incentives of parents, teachers, unions, and politicians, and how each actor fits into the political process. A rhetoric that emphasizes equity may garner support from civil rights groups but alienate the private sector; a rhetoric that underscores accountability may attract public school interest groups but estrange parents. Specifically, there is evidence to suggest that race- and class-neutral programs may garner more public support. Wilson (1978) and Skocpol (1991) argue that while redistributive programs to help the poor may appeal to politicians, they are unable to generate enough public support to make lasting impact. As an alternative, universal programs with “sustained moral imageries” allow for certain groups to receive special services without alienating the greater public (Skocpol, 1991, p. 420). That is, by employing a “consistent moral voice,” a universal policy speaks to all Americans as either
recipients or taxpayers (p. 428). As another example, Brown and Wright (2011) analyzed newspaper coverage of UPK, finding that news articles tend to take a positive tone and present political and business actors as allies to the movement. The authors discuss how the media’s rhetoric both reflects and influences stakeholder opinions on the issue, and highlights the political forces shaping the debate. Together, these illustrations provide a rationale for considering rhetoric in a policy analysis of UPK to better understand the power of the program.

What are the current trends in rhetoric surrounding UPK policy?

Early in the pre-K movement, debate tended to focus on framing the issue in terms of safety and parental responsibility, as well as highlighting the differences between education and day care, in order to work towards public acceptance (Benton Foundation, 1998). Today, there is widespread public and political support for pre-K initiatives generally, and UPK seems to be gaining momentum across the country. Yet there remains “little agreement on the ‘why’” of investing in pre-K, and this lack of common vision can result in tension implementing effective programs across states (Christina & Nicholson-Goodman, 2005, p. 39). Within the targeted versus universal debate, patterns of political rhetoric have emerged in arguments favoring broad program expansion for all children of eligible age. While these narratives are gradations of themes in the field of education as a whole, applied specifically to UPK policy, these rhetorical themes highlight the way that politicians regard the purpose and potential of early education.

The first pattern of rhetoric used to argue for UPK is one of academic achievement, underscoring the idea that promoting UPK enhances performance in grades K-12. An academic achievement perspective highlights teacher qualification and success, and emphasizes academic indicators and assessments (Wright, 2011, p. 249). This rhetoric in the pre-K context echoes a
popular framework in general education based on accountability, put forth with *A Nation at Risk* and strengthened with more recent pressures from No Child Left Behind legislation requiring testing and growth targets. This rhetoric may signal that the rationale for preschool has shifted from parental workforce development, in terms of providing child care to allow parents to return to work, to more student-focused academic preparedness (p. 248). Linking UPK to the state’s logic of academic accountability appeals to politicians, who make big promises for the program’s potential and seek to take credit for improved test scores (Fuller, 2007, p. 64). Indeed, aligning pre-K goals with early primary education goals may now be the norm for politicians and advocacy groups alike: the Foundation for Child Development, for example, recommends a coordinated approach for curricula for students in grades pre-K through third (p. 67). While an academic focus may enhance institution building, opponents worry that such a framework creates an atmosphere that rushes young children into a standardized “assembly line” (p. 136) or may even function as a “barrier to equity and access” for all (Wright, 2011, p. 248).

Other UPK advocates utilize a different rationale in promoting their agenda. An alternative narrative of equity on a citywide scale underscores the idea that promoting UPK enhances the civil liberties of all citizens. The current market structure of early education is an uneven class-based system, as families with more financial resources are more likely to attend programs, and to attend better quality ones (Wright, 2011, p. 246). An equity perspective stresses the potential for universal access to remedy these injustices, putting the focus on equal opportunity for development and not necessarily on achievement outcomes (p. 254). That is, an equity rhetoric stresses universal access as an equalizer (Fuller, 2007, p. 173) and as a symbol for children’s rights (Wright, 2011, p. 254). Moreover, emphasizing educational equity underscores the meritocracy of the American Dream (Williams, 2013), and highlights the potential for
socioeconomic integration to enhance achievement (Kahlenberg, 2015). Some advocates use an equity perspective to represent an even grander idea—that universal programs are a way to build an inclusive movement along the lines of feminism (Lawrence, 2011, p. 41). Though advocates maintain that such a strong moral and social justice rationale is crucial for social policy, skeptics worry this emphasis does not build the infrastructure of quality programming necessary for an effective academic intervention (Zigler, Gilliam & Jones, 2006b, p. 124).

The Present Study

While there have been a number of studies focused on the outcome measures of UPK policies, much work is still needed in the earlier stage of the process: how politicians speak about the issue in order to direct the intervention to begin with. Further, while discussions involving achievement and equity narratives have developed in the field, the two frameworks have not yet been applied to UPK programs in the specific cities of Boston and New York City. Doing so will provide a richer understanding of each program’s elements and potentials for success.

Given the promise of early childhood research and the expanding access to early childhood education throughout the country, the past decade has seen a great increase in political focus on UPK initiatives. While there have been intricate debates about a number facets of UPK implementation, there remain many questions to be answered as these programs become the subject of more political campaigns and become tax measures on more ballots. Sociology and political science literature on the role of political rhetoric highlight the importance of considering how language is used to frame and symbolize political issues to inform and persuade the public. To this end, in the remainder of this paper, I will explore how political rhetoric is used to guide UPK policy in two cities, Boston and New York City.
III. City Overview

Why focus on Boston and New York City?

The two cities explored in this paper represent different aspects of UPK. Boston’s program has been lauded as a gold standard for UPK implementation for raising student test scores; it is seen as evidence that it is possible to develop a high-quality public pre-K program at scale (Duncan & Murnane, 2014, p. 67). Boston’s program has also received attention from the media and researchers alike for its success in closing a “substantial portion of the gap between poor and nonpoor children in school readiness” (p. 68). New York City’s program, on the other hand, is brand-new, but historic in the scope of its expansion in the city’s largest school system. New York City’s program has gained attention in media, with other cities around the country looking to Mayor de Blasio’s plan as a “test case” for a larger UPK expansion (Potter, 2015, p. 2). While the program is too new for an evaluation of test scores on the level of Boston’s, preliminary data on the diversity of New York City’s classrooms can help to assess the possibilities for rapid expansion and how “universal” UPK policy can be in practice (p. 2). Though the cities investigated here are different in size and program chronology, their visions and implementation plans have differed from the start. Presenting these two cases side by side will allow for an analysis of the same policy implemented in two different ways.

Boston’s K1

Context and UPK program components

Boston, one of America’s oldest cities, has grown from a colonial “homesteading community” to an economic and cultural center home to over 617,000 (City of Boston, 2016b).
Boston has a diverse population, with almost 30 percent of children identifying as Black and another 30 percent as Hispanic or Latino. Nearly 30% of children live below the poverty line, much higher than the state average (Strategies for Children, 2010). Boston’s free citywide, universal pre-K program for four-year-olds is officially called Kindergarten 1, or K1. While Boston Public School (BPS) materials tend to use the K1 label, school and government officials often call the program pre-K, and media publications outside the city tend to refer to it as pre-K as well. As of the most recent evaluations, BPS offers 2,467 K1 seats, which is less than half of the space needed for all four-year-olds in the city (Ebbert, 2015). K1 classes are found in 85% of BPS elementary schools, early learning centers, and K-8 schools (Boston Public Schools, 2016b). Due to the fact that K1 cannot yet accommodate all students, BPS advises students who do not receive seats to contact Head Start or Child Care Choices of Boston (Boston Public Schools, 2016c).

Boston’s pre-K program is based on quality professional development guided by standards set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and is fully funded by the city (The White House, 2014; Sachs, n.d.). Yearly programming costs $8,500 per pupil, with $500 dedicated to coaching. Children attend K1 for 6 hours a day, in a classroom with a ratio of 22 students to 1 teacher and 1 paraprofessional (Society for Research in Child Development, 2014). Teachers at the K1 level receive the same pay scale as K-12 teachers, and face the same educational requirements for hiring (Society for Research in Child Development, 2014). The K1 program has a mandated curriculum: Opening the World of Learning for literacy skills and Building Blocks for math skills (National League of Cities, 2012, p. 11).
Program expansion

In his 2005 State of the City address, Mayor Thomas Menino announced his plan “to provide all 4-year-olds in the city with full-day school within five years” (Sachs & Weiland, 2010). K1 grew slowly, starting with 750 K1 students in 38 classrooms in the first year and growing to over 2,000 in 110 classrooms in the fifth (Sachs, n.d.). In these early years, BPS created a Department of Early Childhood in order to focus on identifying resources needed for a quality program, adapting a curriculum, and enhancing coaching and training (Sachs, n.d.). Demographic analyses were conducted to determine which neighborhoods were most in need of classrooms, taking care to add at least two classrooms in a school to encourage community collaboration (National League of Cities, 2012, p. 11). Quality evaluation of environment and instructional practice began in 2006, with child outcome measures added in 2008 (p. 11). With the onset of the economic recession, Mayor Menino scaled back his ambition, and in his 2011 State of the City, he announced his revised goal to double K1 offerings in Boston’s poorest neighborhoods. At this time, Menino also turned towards the private sector for funding, acknowledging challenges in the road to paying for universal access. He told a reporter, "We're going to continue to try to make [seats] available, but I'm not going to say I'll have it done in a year or two” (Ebbert, 2011). Indeed, BPS continues to face expansion barriers: since 2013, the program has only increased growth by 5% (Ebbert, 2015). Figure 2 illustrates the expansion and plateauing of enrollment numbers in the first five years of the K1 program.

Over the past decade, K1 has become part of a larger school readiness initiative dedicated to improving access to and quality of early education, health, and family resources for infants and toddlers. Launched in 2008, the city’s public-private partnership Thrive in Five seeks to strengthen resources on either end of the pre-K program in order to best address the achievement
gap and enhance early childhood development (The White House, 2014). Boston is also seeking to expand pre-K services by scaling out. The K1DS program, formed in 2013, provides the same pre-K program available in BPS classrooms to a pilot group of community-based organizations in an effort to grow K1 through a mixed delivery system. The K1DS expansion allows for increased student capacity, mentoring, and coaching (The White House, 2014). These pilot classrooms are being evaluated to measure performance against to benchmarks for language, literacy, and mathematics in order to reach the goal of doubling quality pre-K capacity (Society for Research in Child Development, 2014).

Program leadership

Due to the fact that the Boston K1 program has been operating for over a decade, there have been changes in program leadership that are important to consider when analyzing program vision and implementation decisions. The longest serving mayor in the city’s history, Mayor Menino was inducted in 1993 with a goal to be known as the “education mayor.” Unveiling his education agenda in 1995, Menino said, “I want to be judged as your mayor by what happens now in the Boston public schools” (Vaznis, 2013). Menino announced his UPK plan in 2005, continuing expansion over the next seven years of his term.

After Menino declined to run in 2013, Mayor Martin Walsh was elected in November of that year, in one of the closest elections in city history (Ryan, 2013). Mayor Walsh continued the theme of mayoral accountability in education advanced by Mayor Menino, with his campaign website stating, “Voters want to know the mayor is ultimately accountable for the quality of the public schools...Marty will not shirk from being accountable” (Ebbert, 2013). Walsh has made his focus on BPS explicit, addressing students directly in his most recent State of the City:
We need you to keep learning, and keep believing in your dreams. The rest is on us. You deserve a community united behind you. That’s why I want you and everyone to know: the Boston Public Schools are my priority. (City of Boston, 2016a)

Mayor Walsh’s campaign promised to double the number of full-day K1 seats so that every four-year-old can attend (Ebbert, 2013). In spring of 2014, Walsh announced the formation of the UPK Advisory Committee, comprised of BPS personnel, city parents, professors, principals, teachers, and non-profit and business employees (City of Boston, 2014).

The third political player in the Boston UPK program is Jason Sachs, who in 2005 was named by Superintendent Thomas Payzant to head a newly formed Department of Early Childhood (Duncan & Murnane, 2014, p. 59). Sachs, who had previously coordinated preschool programs for the Massachusetts State Department of Education, brings a strong focus on research and evaluation to his position in BPS (p. 59). Together with Mayor Walsh, Sachs carries on Mayor Menino’s initial vision for universal access while navigating the challenges of today’s economic and political landscape.

New York City’s Pre-K For All

Context and UPK program components

New York City, first established as a Dutch trading colony, has grown into a financial and cultural capital with one of them most diverse populations in the world (NewYork.com, 2016). New York City’s public school system is notable for its size: with over a million students enrolled, it is the largest school district in the country (New York City Department of Education, 2016a). The New York City Department of Education (DOE) enrolls nearly 30% Black and 40% Hispanic students; half of all New York City children under five live in or near poverty (New York City DOE, 2016e; Citizens’ Committee for Children, 2015). New York City’s free
universal program for four-year-olds is officially called Pre-K for All, which is shortened to pre-K by most leaders and government materials. Pre-K classrooms are available in four types of locations: DOE public schools; DOE pre-K centers, which offer only the pre-K grade; New York City Early Education Centers, which are community organizations that contract with the DOE to provide pre-K programming; and charter schools (New York City DOE, 2016c). As of December 2015, over 68,500 students were enrolled in 1850 locations, with 85% of students receiving their first choice placement (City of New York, 2015c; Durkin, 2015). The population enrolled represents more students than in the entire Boston school district, and the majority of the city’s 73,250 children who are eligible (Ball, 2015; Office of the Mayor, 2014).

New York City’s pre-K program offers free, full day programming for 6 hours and 20 minutes, with yearly pre-K budgets set at $10,239 per pupil (Office of the Mayor, 2014). New York City has adopted the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core; however, the DOE does not mandate a curriculum for pre-K sites, instead allowing schools to select a published pre-K curriculum or design their own program that advances the Common Core Standards. In lieu of a prescribed curriculum, the DOE also provides Common-Core aligned Instructional Tracks and Lanes to align to literacy and math concepts, and unit planning templates and rubrics to outline the features of a high-quality unit of study (New York City DOE, 2015b). Teachers who work in pre-K centers at public schools are employees of the DOE, while teachers who work in Early Education Centers are employees of their individual independent organizations (New York City DOE, 2016d).
Program expansion

UPK was a hallmark of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s election campaign in 2013, and he unrolled a formal implementation plan after he was elected in January 2014 (Potter, 2015; Wong, 2015a). In the school year before UPK began, there were 19,000 children enrolled in full-day programs and an additional 36,000 in half-day programs throughout the city. By the following fall of 2014, the de Blasio administration hit its goal to increase the number of children in full-day programs to more than 50,000. The administration sought to fulfill its expansion goal of 70,000 in the fall of 2015, coming close with a total of 68,500 students enrolled (City of New York, 2015c; Potter, 2015). Figure 3 illustrates that the rate of expansion grew in every income quintile from 2013-14 to 2015-16 school years.

Despite the speed with which the New York City pre-K program expanded, the administration faced a number of challenges in the beginning stages. First, the finances of UPK funding created somewhat of a controversy: though de Blasio originally proposed a tax increase on those making over $500,000 a year to fund his plan, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo rejected the tax even as he approved the UPK program. Instead of the tax, UPK funding came instead from the state’s existing budget (Ludwig, 2015). Another preliminary obstacle of finding enough space for all eligible students was overcome by including pre-K centers, community-based organizations, and charter schools as potential program sites in addition to public schools.

The DOE cites rising application rates as evidence that “enthusiasm among eligible families has skyrocketed” (New York City DOE, 2015c). Today, Pre-K for all is included in the DOE’s plan for “strong school, strong communities” and part of its Equity and Excellence initiative (New York City DOE, 2016b). According to the Mayor’s office, it is also “one of the Administration’s signature efforts to combat inequality” (City of New York, 2015c). The mayor
has suggested that in the coming years, he will focus on making the program “bigger and better from here,” strengthening centers using preliminary assessments of success (City of New York, 2015c).

Program Leadership

The biggest political player in the expansion of New York City’s UPK program is Mayor de Blasio. A former New York City Councilman and Public Advocate, de Blasio won the 2013 election with 73% of the vote. However, given the fact that the election had the lowest voter turnout in almost a century, and considering de Blasio’s controversial relationship with Albany, his administration has faced its share of criticism (Burrough, 2015). UPK was part of de Blasio’s campaign platform from the beginning, as he integrated the proposal, paid for by taxing the rich, into his “tale of two cities” of income inequality. His passion for pre-K reform is evident. “Everyone knows my one true love is pre-K,” he has told reporters, also calling it his team’s “number one initiative” (Zimmer, 2015; City of New York, 2014c). In response to a reporter’s comment that observers may mistake him for the “director of universal pre-K and not the mayor of the City of New York,” de Blasio responded, “That’s a compliment” (City of New York, 2014d). It is also worthy of note that de Blasio’s wife, Chirlane McCray, a former speechwriter and activist, is often vocal on political issues, and speaks about pre-K frequently. Further, given that McCray is black, some believe that she has given black New Yorkers “a sense of representation” on issues of access and equity (Ghansah, 2016).

Another key leader in Pre-K for All is Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña. A veteran of the city school system, Fariña came out of retirement to accept the role of Schools Chancellor and to take on the challenge of expanding UPK (Chapman, 2014). Fariña is known for her focus
on early education, as well as her skepticism of standardized testing. Her own childhood, growing up as a Spanish-speaking student in Brooklyn, has informed her view of the school system as well (Hernández, 2013).

Finally, Richard R. Buery, the Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives, was appointed to lead interagency efforts to launch Pre-K for All in early 2014 (City of New York, 2014a). Buery, a New York native and the son of immigrants, has previously worked in the legal and nonprofit field, becoming the first black leader of Children’s Aid Society in 2009. On his Deputy Mayor appointment, Buery echoed the “tale of two cities” imagery often used by de Blasio: “Our job is to make these two New York Cities one. It’s been my mission in life to help families work their way up the economic ladder,” he said (Peak, 2015).

Summary

Boston and New York City are, in some ways, similar cities. They are both diverse cultural centers with a strong focus on education and the wellbeing of future generations, with respect for leaders who have strong ties to their roots. And yet, they are very distinctive places. Most obviously, their sizes are drastically different: the population of New York City is almost thirteen times the population of Boston, and the number of four-year-old children in New York City outnumbers the entire number of students in BPS, in pre-K through 12th grade (Ball, 2015; U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). The cities also have two different mayoral histories in relationship to UPK policy. While Boston’s proposal for pre-K came from a beloved mayor mid-term, and the subsequent mayor continued to build on his commitment, New York City’s policy is entirely the vision of a mayor who campaigned on its promise. Further, the cities have different expansion timelines: Boston’s rollout started very slowly, and in fact, has recently stalled, while
New York City jumped to its targets nearly all at once. Boston expanded exclusively to public schools, only considering community organizations about a decade into its plan, while New York City expanded into four different types of sites immediately. Boston mandates a curriculum at all pre-K sites, while New York City allows centers to select their own. Notwithstanding their disparate size, how did Boston and New York City diverge in implementing the same policy? In the next two sections, I will argue that the respective administrations’ vision, messaged through political rhetoric, framed the issue of UPK differently in terms of purpose and reach.
IV. Rhetorical Theme #1: Student Outcomes and Program Purpose

The push for UPK, like all school reform, is oriented around enhancing student success. Though it may seem to be a self-explanatory concept, measuring a school’s “success” is dependent on the definition of what a school should be, and what its goals are. How do the administrators in Boston and New York City think about pre-K success? What student outcomes matter to them? Ultimately, what is the purpose of UPK for a student? Though both cities reference UPK’s ability to benefit children academically and beyond, the rhetoric used in Boston centers more so on school success, while the rhetoric used in New York City often expands pre-K’s influence to opportunity at large.

Boston: An Academic Focus

Boston’s commitment to education is long-standing. As the oldest school system in the United States, Boston often touts its status as the “birthplace of public education in this nation” (Boston Public Schools, 2016a). The city’s pride in the school system is evident in the way that Boston administrators speak about K1. Much of the rhetoric used by Mayors Menino and Walsh, and by district personnel like Jason Sachs, focuses on how UPK prepares students for success within its award-winning school system. Boston leaders highlight the connection between UPK and future opportunity by utilizing a rhetoric of academic achievement. The Boston administration frames its UPK program as the start of the school system by employing a symbolic program name, emphasizing the importance of “formal” readiness, and focusing on learning goals. In doing so, Boston rhetoric defines the purpose of school to create learners.
K1 versus pre-K: Program name symbolism

Boston’s commitment to academic success is evident even within the UPK program’s name. Officially, Boston’s early childhood program for four-year-olds is called Kindergarten 1, or K1 (Boston Public Schools, 2016b). In BPS materials, the program is referred to as “kindergarten for younger students” and often included as a subsection of kindergarten as it is typically defined (Boston Public School, 2016c). For example, the BPS Countdown to Kindergarten manual, which lists five steps families can take to ease the transition to kindergarten, advises that “families should start preparing for Kindergarten (K1 for 4 year old and K2 for 5 year old) a full year in advance of their start state, which is the September before their child turns 4 or 5” (Boston Public Schools, 2014). Likewise, the BPS Kindergarten Registration Guide includes a section explaining the registration process for kindergarten as well as for K1 (Boston Public Schools, 2015).

While the Boston leadership does at times refer to the program by other names like pre-K or preschool, the fact that its UPK initiative is officially named Kindergarten 1 highlights the administration’s school-readiness goals. It is an example of value-laden symbolic language that creates an impression on its own, cementing pre-K’s place within the Boston school system. As coordinated pre-K and elementary approaches have become more common, this decision follows the national trend to link the early grades (Fuller, 2007, p. 67). With official school materials often folding K1 into Kindergarten, the result is to distance Boston’s program from preschool that functions simply as day care, and to align it with pre-K that builds academic skills. In this way, the academic achievement rhetoric used in Boston echoes the language used in A Nation at Risk and No Child Left Behind, tying program success to test scores (Wright, 2011, p. 248).
Focus on “formal” school readiness

Beyond the naming of the program itself, the Boston administration explicitly makes the connection from pre-K to the K-12 school system by bringing it into the “formal” education timeline. The Early Childhood Education BPS website proclaims that its goal “is to provide all children with a strong and early start to their formal education” (Boston Public Schools, 2016b). Including K1 in the K-12 tract is seen as a direct pathway to student success. In a BPS news release, Mayor Menino discussed his plan to expand early childhood programs in the city, saying, “The earlier we can get young students into formal schooling, the better their chances of success later on. Early childhood education is a proven way to help close the achievement gap” (Targeted News Service, 2007). In this way, the academic achievement rhetoric used in Boston focuses on school readiness to show how K1 is first and foremost a school reform as opposed to day care.

Boston’s inclusion of K1 into the K-12 tract seems to be a matter of principle rather than circumstance. Given K1’s success in raising test scores, administrators from Boston have acted as consultants to other cities considering implementing similar programs. Advising Seattle’s planning, Sachs said that the district would be missing an opportunity if it did not partner pre-K with the greater school system, saying, “Not only are we producing really strong outcomes for children, we are changing the school system itself” (Higgins, 2014). Further, not only does the K-12 system impose meaning on the pre-K classroom, but it works the other way around as well: according to Sachs, the implementation of K1 has prompted BPS to rework the kindergarten, first, and second grade curriculum (Higgins, 2014). By framing K1 as a school reform, the Boston administration doubles down on its commitment to enhancing academic outcomes.
Boston leaders also emphasize the academic goals of K1 with their rhetoric. Announcing the UPK Advisory committee, Mayor Walsh concentrated on the academic purpose of the initiative by saying, “Pre-kindergarten programs ensure that all students start kindergarten ready to learn” (City of Boston, 2014). Earlier this year, Mayor Walsh and the BPS Superintendent wrote a public appeal for further UPK funding in the Boston Globe, proclaiming, “Let’s live up to our state’s reputation as the world leader in learning” (Walsh & Chang, 2016). Focusing attention on the capacity of K1 to create learners, first and foremost, underscores the academic orientation of K1, and hints at BPS’ broader conception of what purpose the school serves.

The power of pre-K to create learners is embedded in the language of the laws as well. A petition and bill presented to the Senate by Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz, representative of the Second Suffolk District that includes Boston, conditioned the push for UPK on academic rationale. Called “An act relative to universal pre-kindergarten access,” the bill first establishes that “the Commonwealth has a constitutional obligation to cherish its system of education” and second, that “thirty nine percent of Massachusetts third graders are currently not reading at grade level.” Farther down in priority comes an argument for the economy, one for the rate of return of investment in early childhood education, and one referencing achievement gaps or income disparities (S. 253, 2015). Within the legal justification, just as in the leadership’s language, the push for learning is paramount.

**New York City: Seeking Success in School and Beyond**

New York City’s school system is the largest in the nation, serving over 1 million students and operating nearly 2,000 schools (New York City DOE, 2016a). The large size of the
city and school system seems to correspond to the broad-reaching educational goals of the
administration. Mayor de Blasio, Chancellor Fariña, and Deputy Mayor Buery tend to frame
their initiative as preparation for success in school and afterwards. New York City leaders focus
on the connection between UPK and opportunity at large with a rhetoric of citywide equity. By
highlighting Pre-K For All’s preparation for success “in school and in life,” using dramatic
language of social mobility, and employing a metaphor of UPK as a foundation for opportunity,
New York City defines the purpose of school to create future employees and citizens.

“In school and in life”

New York City administrators tend to relay the message that their UPK program serves to
enhance children’s success beyond the walls of the classroom. In 2014, de Blasio said, “We are
well on our way to providing every child with the right start in their education, so they can
succeed in school and in life” (City of New York, 2014h). The following year, he wrote in a
DOE newsletter that children entering pre-K are “on a path that will help them succeed in their
education and beyond” (New York City DOE, 2015c). Further, in a testimony given to a NYC
Council Committee, Chancellor Fariña said, “You understand that by providing free, high-
quality, full-day pre-K to an estimated 73,250 four-year olds by the 2015-2016 school year, we
have the opportunity to dramatically alter the academic and life paths of our City’s children”
(New York City DOE, 2014a). By separating the students’ academic futures from their greater
“life paths,” Fariña calls attention to the fact that pre-K targets a broader domain of success than
school alone.

At times, the administration speaks specifically about the nature of this impact. In its
Pre-K Quality Standards, the DOE writes that UPK is one part of its mission “to ensure all our
students will be ready for the next stage of their education, and ultimately, prepared to succeed and engage as citizens in the 21st century” (New York City DOE, n.d.). In addition to citizenship, the leaders make a direct connection to career readiness. The DOE site that solicits pre-K teacher applications says, “Every student in New York City deserves an opportunity to have the foundation of skills, knowledge, and approaches to learning needed to be ready for school and ultimately, college and careers” (New York City DOE, 2016d). Naming citizenship and career readiness specifically, the rhetoric here frames pre-K as an equity and a development issue and not simply an academic one; it also suggests that New York City administrators see the goal of school to prepare children for the future in a broad sense.

“Opportunity starts now”

Similarly, the Pre-K for All slogan emphasizes that pre-K is the beginning of opportunity not confined to school alone. In advance of the first enrollment deadline, the de Blasio administration created an outreach campaign with the slogan “Opportunity Starts Now,” emphasizing that children will learn skills like sharing and following directions, “preparing them for a lifetime of learning” (New York City DOE, 2014b). “Opportunity Starts Now” utilizes symbolic language to highlight two the meanings of “opportunity.” First, there is a sense of growing prospects in the future. In response to a question about pre-K’s impact on closing the income gap, Deputy Mayor Buery said of pre-K students, “They do better in school, they are less likely to drop out, they are more successful. So we know that we can really really really drive opportunity forward—that’s why our tagline is ‘Opportunity Starts Now’” (Inside City Hall, 2015). The slogan of the program is designed to signal that pre-K is essential to a successful future, inside and outside of school.
There is a second meaning that “opportunity” takes on, one that suggests that certain students will gain access to resources they did not previously have. In the same interview, Deputy Mayor Buery continued: “The mayor, as you know, focused deeply, focused directly on bringing equal opportunity to all New Yorkers, and pre-Kindergarten for all is one of our key strategies for doing so” in order to close the income gap (Inside City Hall, 2015). De Blasio, too, has emphasized

Now, we’re sending these flyers out all over the city, with the phrase ‘Opportunity Starts Now,’ which really says it all. Opportunity starts now for our pre-K kids, because there’s going to be a chance for full-day pre-K that has never existed for tens of thousands of kids. (City of New York, 2014e)

“Opportunity” thus exemplifies the equity rhetoric of New York City. Here, the language of Pre-K for All hinges on the two symbolic meanings behind “Opportunity Starts Now,” broadening the purpose of pre-K to enhance general wellbeing for all.

**Dramatic language of social mobility**

New York City leaders make grand claims when discussing Pre-K for All. A newsletter to parents calls pre-K a “life-changing educational opportunity” (New York City DOE, 2015c). Mayor De Blasio, too, makes the case that pre-K is important by using dramatic language: “Our message is simple, if your child was born in 2012, you have a chance right now to change their lives and jumpstart their futures by applying for pre-K” (City of New York, 2016). This “life-changing” characteristic is based on its ability to improve a child’s economic future. In early 2016, de Blasio said, “Education determines economic destiny, more today than in any point in history. That’s why every child needs to start young, no child should miss this opportunity” (City of New York, 2016).
By calling attention to social mobility with its citywide equity rhetoric, New York City leaders create a “political spectacle” in the words of political scientist Edelman (1988). In de Blasio’s vision, pre-K is not just about children’s school grades today but about their future career and economic wellbeing too. De Blasio integrates economic arguments and establishes pre-K as “the centerpiece of our agenda to fight inequality” (City of New York, 2014h) to call back to the “tale of two cities” he campaigned to remedy. This type of lofty language conveys the administration’s commitment to these ideals, and relies on imagery of universality to emphasize the possibility of the American Dream. In this way, the UPK administrators use language to make enormous promises for their policy, and by doing so, they work to mobilize the public to support their initiatives and to do it quickly.

Summary

The motif of program purpose highlights the differences in the cities’ conception of what a school should be and why early childhood education matters. While Boston’s administration grounds “success” in the academic sphere, the New York City leadership widens the definition of success to broader indicators of opportunity. Boston administrators use rhetoric to align the K1 program to the city’s school system, advancing the idea that pre-K, and schools, generally, build learners. New York City leaders, however, use rhetoric to emphasize a commitment to schools building future citizens and employees outside of the classroom walls.

These differences call to mind the work of educational historian Labaree and the importance of clear goal setting to create well-run and effective schools. Are the two cities’ conceptions of success clearly defined in order to design policy to reach these goals? Administrators in Boston, having concentrated on the potential of pre-K’s academic impacts,
focus the scope of their initiative on enhancing kindergarten readiness. Boston’s academic goals thus demand strategies to enhance instructional quality and provide a proven literacy and math curriculum. New York City’s program, on the other hand, envisions a broader impact of pre-K, extending its view beyond the school. New York City’s goal of building employees and citizens implies that classroom instruction needs to center around interpersonal relationships with a skills-based curricula; it also implicates an expansion plan that allows for true equity of access. Both school districts should take care to align goals for their UPK program with the details of the policy in order to create the most effective system in practice.

The differences between the cities’ perspectives on program purpose highlight the ways in which political rhetoric sets up the ability to test whether a program is successful. Once rhetoric establishes a policy’s purpose, it directs evaluation towards those specific ends. The academic language used in Boston to frame its UPK initiative implies that evaluation measures will concentrate on the academic realm as well. To prove K1’s effectiveness, Boston’s administrators have set up the rationale for an evaluation system of test scores, attendance rates, gifted and talented class enrollment, and other academic indicators. New York City’s equity goals require evaluation to shift towards future indicators like college attendance, employment rates, and household income. However, given that these goals, and the potential proof of success, are so future-oriented, New York City may have to turn towards more immediate measures, like enrollment rates and satisfaction surveys, in order to keep the electorate engaged in the meantime. In this way, the impact of rhetoric to guide policy implementation extends to evaluation as well, as a policymaker has to consider how program recipients and taxpayers alike will consider an initiative a success.
V. Rhetorical Theme #2: Reach and Impact of Program

Just as school reforms may target different student outcomes, they may envision different impacts on the community. Given that school choices involve family involvement—in fact, require it at the early education level—politicians and school leaders may imagine both student and family effects. While the first rhetorical theme looked down a timeline of a student’s future to consider the purpose of UPK, this theme looks at the breadth of impact to examine its ultimate reach. How do politicians “sell” their proposals to the public? What role does the program play in their vision for the city’s future? Just as Boston’s leadership highlighted the academic outcomes of pre-K, they concentrate on student wellbeing, while New York City’s administration expands its intended impact to include the community.

Boston: Visions of Individual Achievement

Today, Boston’s K1 program is lauded for research showing that former pre-K students have increased test scores later in their academic careers. In Mayor Menino’s words, it is “a nationally renowned full-day early childhood education program that’s proven to boost long-term academic, social, and emotional development and close achievement gaps” (Walsh & Chang, 2016). Mayors Menino and Walsh and director Sachs utilize an academic achievement rhetoric to envision the impact of the pre-K program on the future of its students, remaining hyper-focused on the individual. By employing a strategic motto, relying on neurological arguments, and focusing on individual success in closing achievement gaps, the Boston administration’s rhetoric concentrates the impact of K1 on the students specifically.
'Focus on Children’

When Boston leaders speak about early childhood initiatives, they refer almost exclusively to the impact it makes on the students. Indeed, BPS’s official motto, “Focus on Children,” makes that spotlight explicit. Discussing the history of Boston’s education programs, Sachs said that emphasis should be on education instead of day care. He went on, referencing a respected child care center in a Boston suburb called Crispus Attucks: “The field, child care, Crispus Attucks, were designed in part to help women join the workforce. But they were not necessarily designed for young children’s brains in order for them to have high school success” (Shortsleeve, 2013). By drawing a contrast between the family focus of child care and the educational curriculum of K1, Sachs aligns the Boston program with student-specific goals. In this way, the rhetoric rejects a broader community impact in order to focus more closely on student achievement.

This focus on children is deeply embedded into the language of the leadership. In a press conference announcing a UPK Advisory Committee, Sachs said, “We have a wonderful opportunity to change the academic trajectory of every child in this city, and the research is pretty clear that if we get this right we’re going to really change people’s lives” (BNN News, 2013). Even when he says “people,” Sachs refers only to the children whose academic trajectories will be changed, connecting the academic focus of UPK to its reach on students. Further, in his 2016 State of the City address, Mayor Walsh argued for the importance of “making a stand for early education,” focusing on student impact and first referencing parents and other Boston citizens in a call for program funding (City of Boston, 2016a). While it is possible, then, that family effects may be byproducts of the early childhood education initiative, the language makes it clear that the focus is on children first and foremost.
Utilization of neurological arguments

The language of Boston administrators also concentrates the desired impact of K1 on children by using a neurological rationale for early education. Early in the K1 expansion, the Mayor’s 0-5 Researcher and Practitioner Work Group, co-chaired by Jason Sachs, advised the government to focus on development from birth to age five. While the Work Group recommended building a “multi-generational, multi-system structure” that targets children, families, and communities, the rationale presented for the interventions were principally child-based. The recommendation document placed priority on scientific reasons for investing in early education, including the capacity for brain growth, biological response to environmental stress, and the early formation of social, emotional, and cognitive competency (Thrive in 5 Boston, 2006). These student-centered priorities are evident in later language as well. In a 2008 interview, Mayor Menino used a neurological rationale for funding UPK, saying that "the first five years of a kid's life are the most important; that's when a kid's brain develops” (Vaznis, 2008).

This neurological rationale grounds the incentive for pre-K intervention in the academic achievement of the individual students whose brains are in question. Though the Work Group recommendations implicate families by proposing a multi-generational system, the language again makes it clear that UPK serves the children primarily: the system is designed to enhance students’ cognitive growth. The neurological argument frames UPK as an intervention that may require family and community cooperation in order to better serve the students themselves. In addition, Boston’s discussion of the neurological underpinnings of pre-K uses the symbolic language of the brain to emphasize the importance of their K1 initiative for students specifically.
Eliminating gaps serve to increase individual achievement

Boston leaders speak of the potential for pre-K to close achievement gaps, but the focus of the language remains on the impact on individual students’ academic achievement as opposed to class- or community-based change. In a press release announcement for the UPK Advisory Committee, the Walsh administration wrote that pre-K is “part of the city’s multi-year effort to improve the achievement of all Boston students and close the achievement gap by grade three” (City of Boston, 2014). More recently, in their appeal for further K1 funding published in the Boston Globe, Mayor Walsh and the BPS Superintendent wrote, “BPS data show that children who go to K1 outperform their peers in subsequent years—regardless of race or poverty,” ending with a call to the public: “Let’s give all our kids an equal chance at success” (Walsh & Chang, 2016). Paradoxically, by stressing that the program will impact all children equally, the Boston administration concentrates its focus on individual achievement. There is no special emphasis on the way pre-K may benefit certain disadvantaged families or communities; by referencing that the program leads to achievement “regardless of race or poverty,” the rhetoric actively suppresses any type of class- or community-based growth in favor of student-level change.

Just as the neurological rationale channels family interaction towards the greater goal of individual student success, discussions about eliminating achievement gaps follow the same formula. Early in 2016, Mayor Walsh said, "our high quality pre-kindergarten programs have been proven to be among the most effective in the nation at eliminating achievement gaps for all students, which is why expanding these programs to reach even more families is one of our top priorities” (State of Massachusetts, 2014). Here, too, the family is only implicated in order to further the achievement of the students, framed within the academic sphere only.
**New York City: Family and Community Impact**

New York City’s pre-K program is years away from its first major evaluation, when pre-K graduates will have taken elementary school standardized tests. In the meantime, as expansion scales up, administrators speak about the great promise of Pre-K for All to impact family and community wellbeing. The equity rhetoric used by the administration functions to widen the potential reach of pre-K beyond the students. By defining the program as “a win for parents,” a community movement, and part of a moral obligation to close the achievement gap, the New York City leadership frames pre-K as an investment in the entire city’s future.

“A win for parents”

New York City leadership establishes that UPK impacts not only the children who attend the program, but their families as well. Simply put, in the words of Deputy Mayor Buery, “This is a win for parents, a win for pre-K operators, and a win for the City of New York” (New York City DOE, 2015a). This “win” happens through a few pathways. First, de Blasio has highlighted the economic savings of free UPK as one way the administration tackles inequality:

> Private child care, day care, it could be as much as $10,000 a year. For a lot of families, they’ve had to make a very tough choice—are both parents or the single parent going to be able to work? Are they going to be able to work full-time? Or are they going to shell out the money for an appropriate program for their child? And will it be a good enough program? We’re taking that pressure and stress off the table. (City of New York, 2015a)

This savings can make a make a dramatic difference: de Blasio has said that families tell him that it “has changed their family’s budgets and their family’s lives.” With a dramatic flourish alluding to a miracle, he added: “Can I get an Amen, PTA?” (City of New York, 2015b).

Pre-K can also impact parents in other ways. De Blasio has stressed that enrollment aligns parents’ schedule with their “needs and their reality” (City of New York, 2014b). Fariña,
too, noticed that with this change, parents can say, “I can now do this this and this, I can go back to work full time, I can take care of an older child, I can volunteer at my child’s school—it’s a whole different way of looking at their lives” (City of New York, 2014d). In addition, there is a potential for intergenerational learning. Chancellor Fariña noted that, “What these kids are going to do—they're going to go home and teach their parents about things that their parents may not know” (City of New York, 2014d). In this way, New York City leaders take care to include parents and families in their analysis of UPK’s impact. Their language highlights the fact that not only will pre-K enhance the wellbeing of students, but parents too, touching on its potential to make a citywide impact.

**Community movement**

The New York City administration frames UPK as a larger movement that will impact the entire community. At times, de Blasio talks about community change emanating from the school system. For example, he described events that can shape a neighborhood’s schools:

Every child who gets to grade level helps the next child get there because the whole dynamic of the classroom improves. Every kid who's doing well frees up a little more time for teachers to spend with kids who need a little more help. So, this is literally winning the day for each child to help us build a school system that can serve all more effectively, to help us build a future for this city where we're a strong city, a unified city, a city with a workforce ready for the 21st century. (City of New York, 2014g)

Similarly, de Blasio often uses the metaphor of building a house to explain that pre-K is a foundation for lifetime learning that will “not only improve the lives of children and families individually, it’s going to start to bring up our school system overall” (City of New York, 2014d).

In turn, this school system change will make an impact on the community at large. De Blasio said that with the quality of the school system improved, the entire city will be changed:
Literally 20 years ahead, the future of New York City … will be much brighter because we’re going to have a much more educated workforce. We’ll have a group of young people leaving our public schools ready for the modern economy in a way that just isn’t true today (City of New York, 2014c).

This future is part of de Blasio’s vision for a “societal change” to meet changing demands (City of New York, 2014c), and he imagines the promise of pre-K bringing together citizens from every corner of the city. Before the launch of Pre-K for All, he said, “This has become a movement—nothing less than a movement because so many people—educators and community activists and parents—have joined together to make this a reality” (City of New York, 2014f). By framing the push for UPK as a movement, de Blasio uses language to create a “spectacle” of citywide cooperation and to highlight its inclusive atmosphere (Lawrence, 2011). While pre-K may be a program for children, New York City rhetoric highlights its potential to impact a much wider audience.

**Moral obligation to close the achievement gap**

New York City administrators employ a moral argument when discussing the need to close the achievement gap. De Blasio often highlights how universality is a fundamental part of Pre-K For All, designed to provide opportunities to those who might not otherwise have them:

> We said from the beginning we wanted this to be universal. We wanted it to be universal for the good of all, because parents across the board deserve this. Every child needs this as part of their educational preparation. If we’re going to have a strong city and nation, early childhood education is absolutely fundamental—it should not be for some and not for others. (City of New York, 2015a)

What “should” be available is the driving force behind his pre-K plan. This moral imperative is apparent in other language as well—for example, when de Blasio said, “Our obligation is to bring up this school system in every neighborhood, to end the notion that there are some schools
that families don’t want to send their kids to because they feel they are not good enough” (City of New York, 2014d).

At times, de Blasio directly references the inequality he refers to in his “tale of two cities.” Speaking of pre-K, de Blasio explained his passion:

Why? Because we know it will fundamentally change the lives of the children. We also believe, in this administration, in tackling inequality. If you’re going to tackle inequality, pre-K does it in two ways … this sets up a future for a more equal society. (City of New York, 2015a)

In an interview with the New York Times, de Blasio said that one way to break a “cycle” of intergenerational poverty is through UPK, “a fair act to recognize that we were going in the wrong direction as a society” (Ghansah, 2016). As such, the rhetoric used by de Blasio exemplifies Wilson (1978) and Skocpol’s (1991) idea of “moral imagery,” targeting recipients of the program as well as other taxpayers. De Blasio and his administration adopt a “moral voice” in order to incentivize participation by everyone, including those who do not have an eligible child, thereby expanding the reach of UPK beyond the student to the community at large.

Summary

The rhetoric of each administration illustrates how the Boston and New York City administrations envision the potential reach of UPK and the future of their city. While Boston’s leadership concentrates pre-K’s impact on student achievement, the discussion in New York City involves parental and community impact as well. Boston administrators use rhetoric to “focus on children,” honing in on the science of the brain and improvements in individual test scores; parents and community members factor into the pre-K plan only to enhance student success. In
New York City, De Blasio and his administration make big promises of change for parents, communities, and the city overall, stemming from economic and moral incentives.

By discussing how pre-K fits into the city’s future vision, administrators from the two cities tap into the political nature of their early education initiatives. Thinking of the role of political rhetoric to both message and mobilize, the examples used within this rhetorical theme highlight the ways in which an administration may attempt to gain votes, support, and funding from its constituents. An early childhood education initiative is a large investment in both money and time, because many results will not be visible for years down the line. Discussing a pre-K program’s potential impact provides a way to convince the public that those big investments are worthwhile. Boston has targeted its campaign around an impact on individual students by using a children-focused framework to appeal for support from the city’s taxpayers and parents. In turn, its implementation strategies are mostly centered on the classroom experience for the children. New York City, on the other hand, frames its UPK initiative as a broader movement, and leaders opt for implementation strategies that more directly appeal to families.

The rhetoric discussed in this section also provides insight into the nature of evidence-based policymaking as it relates to UPK programs. The practice of evidence-based policymaking uses the best available research to identify policies that work and are cost-effective (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2014). Given the recent increase in research on early childhood education initiatives, there is more evidence available from different fields on the issue of UPK than ever before. The academic achievement rhetoric used in Boston orients the policy decisions around research focused on individual achievement, like that of neuroscience and test score evaluations. In New York City, the citywide equity rhetoric often calls on real-life testimony
and more philosophical rationale, including moral arguments for UPK. As such, Boston’s rhetorical frame may lend itself to more concrete, academic evidence-based policymaking practices, while New York City’s focus on lived experience as evidence highlights a different rationale. As such, a strong rhetorical message may have the potential to influence the types of research and reasoning selected by elected officials in evidence-based policymaking.
VI. Connecting Rhetoric and Implementation

In the last two sections, I have explored the language that the Boston and New York City administrations use in government materials, press conferences, and interviews to both inform and persuade their constituents about the power of UPK. Boston maintains an academic focus when considering student outcomes, while New York City expands the scope of pre-K’s purpose to include measures of economic and career success. Boston concentrates the impact of UPK to individual student achievement, while New York City also implicates the future of families and the community. Taken together, the rhetorical themes show how the same UPK policy goal—to provide free pre-K to every four-year-old child—can be framed very differently. Ultimately, Boston’s academic achievement rhetoric focuses its attention on the “pre-K” part of UPK, while New York City’s equity rhetoric focuses on the “universal” part; these different visions are reflected in different pathways of implementation. Specifically, the Boston administration’s rhetorical focus on pre-K reflects an implementation focus on teachers’ instruction, a slow timeline of expansion, and a measured push into community organizations. On the other hand, New York City’s treatment of universality as paramount reflects an implementation focus on student characteristics, a more urgent timeline of expansion, and immediate growth into community organizations.

**Boston: The “Pre-K” in UPK**

Boston’s focus on academic student outcomes and individual success is clear in the language used by Mayors Menino and Walsh and by program director Jason Sachs. With a vision of UPK tightly focused on the children in the classroom, the K1 implementation plan puts student achievement at its heart. The language used by the city’s leadership reveals the
program’s focus on the “pre-K” part of UPK. Just as the rhetoric used by city officials highlights a commitment to learning, its implementation plan focuses on the quality of instruction with a slow rollout and a measured expansion from public schools to community organizations.

**Teacher focus on quality instruction**

From the start of the K1 expansion, the Boston program focused on the quality of classroom instruction in order to enhance the measures of academic success targeted by administrators. According to a presentation by director Sachs and a fellow researcher to the Society for Research in Child Development, the first five years of evaluation of Boston K1’s history were characterized by this “tremendous focus on quality improvement through PD [professional development] and structural changes.” These changes included implementing a mandated curriculum, investing $3 million in coaching over 3 years, scheduling trainings for principals and paraprofessionals, and setting up professional development systems with ongoing seminars (Society for Research in Child Development, 2014). An article co-authored by Sachs mentions the emphasis placed on receiving accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children as another way to enhance quality standards in the classroom (Sachs & Weiland, 2010). Thinking about the “key lessons” from the first stage of the K1 expansion, Sachs and Weiland concluded, “promoting instructional quality should be the central goal, with quality supports provided at multiple levels” and that “expanding access has to entail expanding access to high-quality preschool” (Society for Research in Child Development, 2014; emphasis in original).

The administration’s more informal rhetoric, too, bridges the connection between its academic vision and instructional quality. Sachs has been clear in his opinion that quality
matters: in a presentation to Seattle City Council, advising the city on its own UPK program, he said, “Quality, quality, quality. I really think who the teacher is and what the teacher teaches is going to be critical” (Wing, 2015). One BPS PowerPoint put forth that “quality is necessary to get outcomes,” and included a section on “what should quality look like” (Sachs, n.d.); another insisted that the district “is focused on improving program quality, including through uniform ELA and math curricula and NAEYC accreditation” (Boston Public Schools, 2012). In an independent meta-analysis of the evidence base on preschool education, Yoshikawa et al. (2013) praised Boston as a rigorously evaluated program that provides “excellent quality,” and attributes its success in closing the achievement gap to “a combination of program standards, attention to teacher qualifications and compensation, additional ongoing on-site quality supports such as the ones described previously, and quality monitoring.” Other research in the field also maintains that program quality is paramount to an intervention’s lasting impact (see Kirp, 2015; Fuller, 2007), and that process quality elements like teacher-child relationships are key to program success (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). In this way, Boston’s academic focus seems to be aligned successfully with its implementation strategies to achieve the high instructional quality necessary to produce student-centered results.

**Slow expansion timeline**

Boston’s vision for an academically oriented UPK program provided the rationale for administrators to slowly research and develop the initiative. The Boston program was announced in 2005 and grew slowly, expanding from 750 K1 students to 2,000 within five years (Sachs, n.d.) then somewhat stalling after that. While there is frustration within the community about the limited availability of K1 seats for parents, and the administration is facing unexpected
funding challenges today (Ebbert, 2015), the slow pace of the expansion was indeed strategic. After the first year of K1, Sachs commissioned a report on the program’s success, and when the *Boston Globe* reported its “sobering results,” there was great pushback from investors and district personnel. However, Sachs believes he was able to avoid being fired, and continue to work to improve K1 quality, by making a specific case:

> Instead of greatly expanding the number of preK classrooms, the district should slow the rate of expansion and devote significant resources to improving program quality. Only by doing so, [Sachs] argued, could preK education in Boston contribute meaningfully to closing achievement gaps. (Duncan & Murnane, 2014, p. 59)

In this way, Boston’s administration took care to align its goals of academic success with a slow expansion timeline in order to install the quality supports necessary, even if that meant the pace of the rollout came at the expense of family convenience.

**Measured push into community organizations**

Boston’s K1 program started exclusively in BPS classrooms. It was not until 2013 that Boston created pilot classrooms in community-based organizations to expand pre-K services through a mixed delivery system (The White House, 2014). Because of the district’s more formal institutional oversight, Sachs anticipated that “the odds are more likely that public schools can do a better job” (Shortsleeve, 2013). With the slow pace of full district expansion, the Boston K1DS program was established to address the gaps in K1 access while still reaching a universal standard of excellence for participating organizations. Working with BPS, Boston K1DS synchronizes K1 curricula and professional development sessions for teachers in community organizations, while evaluating these classrooms for benchmarks in language, literacy, and mathematics (Barr Foundation, 2016; Society for Research in Child Development, 2014). As such, the Boston administration sought to manage the conditions necessary to produce
their academic vision by controlling the locations of K1 classrooms, first by limiting the expansion to BPS classrooms only, and then by highly regulating community partnership.

**New York City: The “Universal” in UPK**

The language used by Mayor de Blasio, Deputy Mayor Buery, and Chancellor Fariña illustrates the New York City administration's focus on career and civic outcomes, and family and community impact. With a vision of UPK that encompasses the entirety of the city, the Pre-K for All implementation plan hinges on reaching every eligible child. The equity rhetoric used by New York City’s administration demonstrates the program’s focus on the “universal” part of UPK. This language, dedicated to broad program goals and impact, is aligned to its implementation plan centered on the diversity of the student population, achieved through an urgent rollout and immediate expansion into community organizations.

**Student focus on enrollment and program diversity**

From the start of its UPK campaign, New York City focused on the enrollment of the student body. First, the DOE and the Mayor’s office created a public outreach initiative targeted at all students and families. The DOE set up three avenues for applications, via the official pre-K website, over the phone, or in person at one of twelve citywide Family Welcome Centers. In order to accommodate families from all backgrounds, the DOE offered online application translation into nine languages and phone support in more than 200 (New York City DOE, 2015c). Outreach teams went into neighborhoods by foot, visiting barbershops, beauty salons, street fairs, and PTA meetings (City of New York, 2016); eligible parents also received robo-
calls and calls from live staff, as well as invitations for “literally hundreds of events” (City of New York, 2015b). Deputy Mayor Buery said of this outreach effort:

You know my favorite movie is ‘Field of Dreams,’ keeping with the baseball theme. So you know they said, ‘If you build it, they will come’? So we’ve taken the exact opposite approach—so we have a very intense outreach effort to ensure that parents are aware of pre-Kindergarten opportunities. (City of New York, 2015b).

Thus, instead of focusing on building the system in order to draw parents in, the administration chose to reverse their plan, targeting enrollment in order to drive progress. The universality of the enrollment process is paramount to de Blasio. Pointing to his lapel at a press conference in 2014, he said, “I have this U in the UPK pin, the concept of universal pre-k has been around a long time, just one problem: it hasn’t been universal. Our plan literally makes it universal” (City of New York, 2014d).

The administration often goes one step further, tying the success of its initiative to diversity. In 2015, De Blasio said that pre-K can “add a new element” to the school system, creating a “wonderful United Nations of children” and laying the foundation for policies that reduce segregation. At the same press conference, Farina said, “The reality is diversity is beyond ethnicity, beyond socioeconomic, it’s also about English language learners, it’s about special needs kids” (City of New York, 2015b). Pushing for diversity, in all its forms, is a key strategy for the administration. In a letter from Buery to private Pre-K For All providers, he wrote, “To be truly successful, Pre-k for All must reach all communities and reflect the incredible diversity of our city” (New York Times, 2015). Buery has also said, “you can’t discount the value of those young people being in diverse classrooms with people in a variety of income levels” (Inside City Hall, 2015). However, one outside evaluation report maintains that there are additional steps that Pre-K For All should take to maximize the opportunities for mixed-income classrooms. In order to “make New York City’s Universal Pre-K even better,” the city should
provide additional transportation, better align enrollment priorities, and incorporate different funding streams (Potter, 2015, p.13). Thus, according to some assessments, even though Pre-K For All may have succeeded in meeting its enrollment targets, it is still lacking in its push for diversity.

**Urgent expansion timeline**

New York City’s vision for a citywide impact led to a quickly scaled-up expansion. De Blasio has said that because “we modeled this program on the concept of universality,” it needed to quickly expand to offer every child a seat: simply, “that’s how the plan works” (City of New York, 2014b). The administration makes it clear that it was “determined from the beginning not to do this on a sort of pilot basis, or limited basis, or just in a few districts” (City of New York, 2014c). In a 2014 document by the Office of the Mayor, the DOE, and other City offices, the authors found the city “ready to launch” its UPK program, using language of urgency:

> Filling the gap in full-day pre-K access cannot wait. The children we could potentially place in programs this September will not get another chance to have a pre-K experience that sets them up for achievement and increased opportunities later in life. We owe it to our children to maximize the number of options to add each year, rather than set limitations driven by legislative sessions and budget processes far removed from the pressing needs of our city’s children now. (Office of the Mayor, 2014)

Fariña has echoed this language, testifying to the Committees on Education and Women’s Issues that “every child not already in a pre-K program has already lost critical learning time. Filling the gap in full-day pre-K access cannot wait” (New York City DOE, 2014a). This urgency of expansion has been reflected in media coverage as well: at every press conference on Pre-K For All, and even at many on other topics, news outlets ask for updates on enrollment numbers. In this way, the media may have both reflected and promoted the administration’s sense of urgency in providing seats (Brown & Wright, 2011).
**Immediate expansion into community organizations**

In order to meet its targets for universal enrollment, New York City expanded its pre-K program into community organizations immediately. In early 2016, de Blasio recalled:

“We’re very proud of the fact that when we started pre-K, we said we’re going to work with religious schools, we’re going to work with charter schools, we’re going to work with everyone, and that’s part of the why we reached the level we reached. That’s why we have 68,000 kids in pre-K, that’s why, as Richard, said we were able to reach such a high level of quality across this whole initiative. (City of New York, 2016)

In press conferences, de Blasio and his administration tout the advantages of expanding beyond the public schools, saying, “the community-based sites allow us to provide seats even in areas that have overcrowding in the traditional public schools” (City of New York, 2014e). In an effort to utilize all available locations, the mayor stresses that parents “have the right to apply” to multiple centers, and should consider locations not just near their home, but also near their work or relatives’ homes (City of New York, 2014e). Asked whether a parent should apply to a community organization if he or she has also applied to a public school, Deputy Mayor Buery said, “Apply, apply, apply, apply, apply.” The mayor followed up: “Apply a lot” (City of New York, 2014b). Coupled with its urgent timeline, the administration’s expansion into community organizations represents an implementation strategy designed to achieve its goal of broad-reaching impact.

**Summary**

Boston and New York City’s UPK administration utilize markedly different rhetorical themes in discussing the purpose and impact of their initiatives. Boston leaders use a rhetoric of academic achievement, focusing on school-based outcomes and individual student success. Their academic language aligns with their implementation focus on the “pre-K” part of UPK
through instructional quality and a slow, measured expansion plan. In New York City, leaders utilize a rhetoric of citywide equity, highlighting beyond-school measures and an impact on family and community. This is reflected in an implementation plan targeting the “universal” part of UPK through enrollment and diversity outreach in a quickly scaled-up expansion plan. In sum, the differences in the way that administrators speak about their initiatives are reflected in the way that they built the specific pieces of their program. Boston’s Sachs repeats, “Quality, quality, quality” (Wing, 2015); New York City’s Buery repeats, “Apply, apply, apply, apply, apply” (City of New York, 2014b). While both cities are seeking universal access to pre-K services, they have very different visions and approaches.

A full analysis of the benefits and detriments of the “pre-K” and “universal” focuses is beyond the scope of this paper, but the two tactics call back to some UPK critics’ concerns. For example, the implementation strategies chosen by the Boston team raise questions of equity and access for students who do not receive seats in K1. Likewise, the implementation strategies chosen by the New York City team highlight concerns over whether the program supports instructional quality. Both cities’ plans raise the question of whether expectations for these large programs are realistic given the research literature grounded in small interventions. More generally, however, the case studies in this paper present evidence for how rhetoric relates to implementation. Because the language and imagery of each city’s vision creates frames of internalized concepts and values, the way the each city “tells the story” of pre-K is different. The value-laden language, embedded in the programs’ names and mottos, guide their implementation focus towards either instructional quality or enrollment outreach. In addition, rhetoric reflects how the two cities have targeted different stakeholders with their program plan. Boston’s focus on “pre-K” appeals to parents of eligible students, and other academically
minded adults—as Boston has the nation’s largest percentage of residents over 25 with a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Rocheleau, 2014), that may be a strategic move. New York City’s focus on the “universal,” on the other hand, is targeted to garner public support in the spirit of Wilson (1978) and Skocpol (1991), appealing to recipients and taxpayers through a moral voice. Ultimately, the connections between rhetoric and implementation work to highlight the power of language, and the importance of considering the way politicians speak about early education interventions.
VII. Conclusions

This paper has investigated a nuance in the field of early childhood education: the language that politicians and educational leaders use to discuss UPK. Given the rising popularity of UPK programs, it is important that we understand the potentials and limitations of these expensive initiatives. While there is much research focus on the outcome measures of early childhood programs, it is also necessary to analyze political rhetoric in the early stages of a program in order to understand its goals. There is evidence in sociology and political science literature to suggest that rhetoric guides policy by framing and symbolizing political issues to inform and persuade the public. That is, what politicians and political leaders are hoping to accomplish—and how they express these goals—is related to how they plan to get there.

Specifically, the cities of Boston and New York, while designing a program with the same immediate goal, have approached the issue from two different perspectives. See Figure 1 for a summary of the present paper’s argument.

How do the cities differ, and why?

Boston and New York City are both diverse cultural centers, but with differences in how they implemented the same policy. The respective administrations’ visions, messaged through political rhetoric, have framed the issue of UPK differently in terms of program purpose and reach of impact. First, the two cities have different conceptions of what a school should be and what a pre-K program should do. While Boston’s administration grounds success in the academic sphere, the New York City leadership uses language to widen the definition of success to broader indicators of “life” and “opportunity.” Boston’s academic rhetoric advances the idea that pre-K, and schools, generally, builds learners; New York City leaders use an equity rhetoric
to emphasize a commitment to schools building *citizens* and *employees* outside of the classroom walls. Second, the two cities have different conceptions of UPK’s impact, and different visions for their city’s future. While Boston’s administration concentrates on student achievement, New York City’s looks more broadly, targeting parental and community impact as well. Boston administrators in turn implement strategies to “focus on children” through high quality instruction, as New York City seeks to provide broad-reaching opportunity through enrollment and diversity outreach. Why might these administrations have chosen to answer the same question of UPK in two different ways?

### Differences in political nature

One reason why the two cities might differ in their visions is that their UPK programs have different political foundations. Political rhetoric is designed to both message and mobilize, and language is designed to target specific stakeholders in certain ways. Language can establish the course for future programs, as “the sales pitch can become the reality” (Fuller, 2007, p. 135). Boston’s UPK program, announced by a respected mayor who had already served for ten years, had very different political motivation than did New York City’s, conceived as a campaign promise from a candidate in a fractured Democratic field. Because the mayors were in different political atmospheres, they may have strategically targeted their messages to advance their program given their specific situation.

In Boston’s case, the mayor’s long-standing focus on education set up his mid-tenure promise for UPK. Mayor Menino was beloved, ending his service in 2013 with an 82% approval rating—making him more popular in the city than even the Boston Red Sox (Schwartz, 2013). The promise to provide pre-K seats for every student over the course of five years thus came
from a respected politician with deep roots into the city’s community. Without the pressure of having an election on the line to implement his plan, Mayor Menino may have felt more freedom to target his initiative to families with eligible children, without providing much incentive for other citizens or taxpayers. When Mayor Walsh campaigned in 2013, Mayor Menino having decided he would not seek another term, he continued using the language and academic framing of the previous administration, building on its momentum. Just as Mayor Menino grounded the UPK expansion in his push for school system advocacy and reform, Mayor Walsh did too. It is also interesting to note that the mayors’ discussions of K1 have been generally confined to education-specific events, for example, in an announcement of the Universal Pre-K Advisory Board or an op-ed asking for further funding for the program, as opposed to inserting K1 developments into other news items.

In New York City, on the other hand, de Blasio’s program was a central part of his campaign platform and his “tale of two cities” narrative. In this way, his message targeted not just school outcomes but civic and economic ones, implicating family and community members. His broad outreach plan may stem from the fact that he needed support from parents and non-parents alike in order to be elected into office. Indeed, the campaign genesis of the policy is evident in some of de Blasio’s language: “Parents are voting with their feet,” he has said of enrollment numbers (City of New York, 2014f). In this way, the political motivation behind de Blasio’s program focused on conveying the appeal for his policy to many types of citizens. In addition to simply being elected, de Blasio may have felt the desire to set a precedent and accomplish what critics deemed impossible. In 2015, de Blasio quoted Frank Sinatra, saying,

I will borrow from the famous song, ‘if you can make it here you can make it anywhere’... I think that proves that there are big things yet to be done in education, and New York City’s going to show just how far we can go. (City of New York, 2015b).
His pride in the program suggests that he sees the success of UPK to be tied to his legacy as a mayor. In this vein, de Blasio and his team seem to take advantage of every opportunity to speak about the program, organizing dozens of press conferences during the program’s short two-year history. While there is evidence to suggest that this frequent mayoral involvement may provide crucial leadership in launching a large initiative (Crawford, Lader & Smith, 2015), at this early stage of UPK expansion, it is only clear that de Blasio’s eagerness to broach the UPK message at times stands in contrast to Boston’s more formal approach to communication.

**Differences in chronology**

Another reason why the two cities may have different rhetorical frames for their UPK initiatives is that they are products of different eras. That is, the Boston initiative began a decade before the New York one, when there were different issues at the forefronts of voters’ minds. There has been much more attention directed to the topic of pre-K interventions over this time, as well as a greater focus on universal programs. Moreover, the trends of general education have shifted, and research has advanced in many fields. For these reasons, the different visions of Boston and New York may be because of chronological differences.

Boston’s academic focus may reflect the focus on accountability and test scores popular in the 1990s and 2000s. Following the “crisis” of education put forth in *A Nation at Risk*, *No Child Left Behind*, passed in 2001, promoted standards-based reform with state requirements to develop skills assessments. With the law’s focus on annual testing, the educational climate of the country at the time of Mayor Menino’s announcement revolved around promoting academic outcomes and focusing on teacher qualifications. In this way, the frame provided by Mayor Menino for his visionary UPK initiative built on the country’s academic focus. Mayor Walsh
has largely continued this academic theme, though there is evidence that he may be integrating more messages of broad-reaching opportunity into his rhetoric as time goes on. For example, his recent appeal for further UPK funding includes the rationale that it is “a transformative investment in our children, our communities, and our Commonwealth’s future” (Walsh & Chang, 2016). Perhaps this an indication that as No Child Left Behind has fallen out of favor with the public, so too has academic-focused rhetoric lost some of its political appeal.

In New York City, de Blasio’s campaign promise appeared as the country was more engaged in issues related to income inequality and educational equity. In 2011, following the protests in New York City, the Occupy Wall Street movement gained momentum in its fight against social and economic inequality worldwide. De Blasio’s identity as the reformer of the “tale of two cities” fit into this sense of growing unrest, and his equity framework may have been a reflection of this national climate. In addition, the trend towards universal interventions within early childhood education, and the endorsement of UPK by President Obama in 2013, may have created an atmosphere more conducive to de Blasio’s equity rhetoric. As reframing takes time (Lakoff, 2014), the work on expanding access to pre-K in the decade after Boston’s proposal may have put the structures in place for New York City’s moral argument. Moreover, the recent rejection of No Child Left Behind accountability measures, and the adoption of Obama’s Every Student Succeeds Act, may suggest that success in both college and career are more important priorities today than solely school-based outcomes. In this way, the national focus on income inequality, and the changing standards within the field of education, may have provided the conditions necessary for de Blasio’s equity rhetoric to flourish.
Differences in size

While this paper has attempted to highlight the distinctions between Boston and New York City rhetoric and policy that extend beyond their simple size differences, the scope of the New York City expansion cannot be ignored. New York City faced drastically different challenges than Boston, being such a large city. However, considering to its size alone, one might expect that New York City would roll out its expansion plan more slowly and face more barriers to universality, when in fact, the circumstances were reversed. Perhaps, then, the size of the cities matters primarily as it interacts with the broader city’s vision, or with other factors like political nature and chronology. Further, the subject of size, generally, may matter more to the conversation about program success than about program expansion. Because a rich history of research suggests that the “high-quality” piece of a high-quality UPK expansion is the key to making long-lasting impacts, it is possible that New York City’s sheer size means that quality is impossible to control. Indeed, it may even mean that in a small city like Boston, that quality is impossible to control. As the former education commission of Tennessee, where a recent UPK expansion has failed to produce lasting positive results, wrote in *The Washington Post*, “what leads us to believe that we can take small, high-quality pre-K programs and blow them out into a statewide or nationwide intervention?” (Huffman, 2016). The question of program size underscores the role of evidence-based policymaking, in selecting program models and research rationale, as well as the importance of setting realistic policy expectations.

**Rhetoric’s Role: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Reality**

It is nearly impossible to approach a policy decision in a vacuum, without the influence of the opinions of other stakeholders. In today’s technologically connected world, the constant
barrage of political tweets, videos, and op-ed means that we increasingly filter information through these outside lenses. Because the way we naturally process information is by considering what we hear, read, and observe, it is increasingly important to consider how strategic frame analysis can play a role in advocacy (Gruendel & Aber, 2007, p. 50). That is, rhetoric’s strong influence on framing means that it is inherently an element of the policy discussion. Further, it may be beneficial for an administration to frame an issue as it wishes, as opposed to allow for the media to take control of the message. In this way, the discussion of Boston and New York City’s UPK policies highlight how strongly rhetoric can impact framing, and how what may seem like small differences in language actually function to create very different visions.

Precisely because rhetoric plays such a large role in framing, it is possible that it may bias an educational leader, or an elected official, in selecting a policy option that is not objectively the best one. One way that rhetoric may bias decisions is by shifting a policy focus to a political one; in this way, rhetoric may be in danger of turning into spin or propaganda. For example, one model for policy decision-making put forth by Bardach (2012) involves defining the problem at the outset, in order to assemble evidence, construct alternatives, and confront possible trade-offs before making a selection. To Bardach, defining the problem is the most crucial step, setting up the reason for doing the hard work of making a decision and giving the process direction. It is only later that a cohesive vision comes together: “in the last phases of policy analysis, your final problem definition will probably help you structure how you tell your story” (p. 1). This perspective may compete with the idea of political rhetoric, which structures “how you tell you story” from the very beginning. As such, having an issue framed with strong rhetoric may mean that a political leader skips some of the decision-making steps, or that he or she has already
decided on the solution, instead of trying to find the *right* policy to get there. More generally, the impact and implications of rhetoric highlight the political pressures at work in the education sector, and the bureaucratic challenges that may inhibit meaningful progress.

Ultimately, political rhetoric is a reality of the world we live in today. And while it is important to consider its impact, it is also important to keep it in perspective. Language plays a role in carrying and evoking ideas, but those ideas are still primary (Lakoff, 2014, p. 2). The different ideas of each administration about UPK’s potential, and about their city’s ideal future, are at the heart of the discussion of this paper. The way that each city’s leaders speak about those ideas is how the public at large—from the academic community to the taxpayers—comes to understand what they mean. In sum, the fact that there are so many details to consider when analyzing in the simple way UPK is presented in political conversation attests to the fact that it is an educational movement gaining traction throughout the country. Regardless of the specific rhetorical stance selected by a school district or city, UPK presents many opportunities to engage the public and political spheres alike.

**Future Research**

While I have sought to build a case for considering rhetoric in the UPK discussion and illustrate that rhetoric is related to UPK policy implementation, future analyses should study this relationship in more detail. First, research should investigate the direction of influence: do changes in rhetoric correlate with or cause changes in implementation strategy? Second, research should work to further connect rhetoric to evaluation, highlighting how rhetorical choices set up assessments of a program’s success. Third, research should explore the power of
rhetoric to bias objectivity when utilizing evidence-based policymaking practices, and consider how to harness rhetorical frames to select best policy options.

Further, future research should continue to parse out rhetorical themes related to Boston’s and New York City’s UPK programs specifically, noting whether and when they change, and how future assessments relate to their original goals to measure success. Both cities face upcoming challenges related to UPK that encourage close analysis. Boston is currently experiencing funding constraints—how will the city’s leaders “tell the story” of UPK in order to keep the program alive, and grow it to be truly universal, under such circumstances? New York City will soon hold a mayoral election—how will de Blasio frame his program’s vision in his second campaign, and what will happen if another candidate wins? If the implementation decisions continue as they are, can Boston’s program really be called “universal,” and can New York City’s really be called “high-quality”? More generally, future research should expand the lens of rhetorical analysis to consider other themes in the administrations’ language, and discuss how each team may present both academic and equity arguments.

Lastly, research should explore the language used at the federal level as UPK programs become more common across the country. President Obama was the first to mention pre-K in his State of the Union address—will the next president continue with this focus on early childhood education? In addition, the continued national conversation about the merits of targeted versus universal programs should include a consideration of program rhetoric to assess the goals of each program and its feasibility in a given community.

This paper explored a preliminary step in the analysis of the relationship between rhetoric and UPK policy in regards to how rhetoric is related to implementation, and how the goals of a policy are expressed through rhetoric. Here, I was primarily interested in how and why two
city’s visions for the same policy may differ. A valuable next step in this field would be to explore which of the many rhetorical frames would best accomplish an administration’s goals. Given the increased focus on early education nationally, and the importance of language to frame policy goals, future analyses of UPK initiatives should be critical not only of the test scores, graduation rates, and parental satisfaction of these programs, but must also consider the way that the leadership talks about the purpose and impact of UPK.
Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>Boston</th>
<th>New York City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>Citywide equity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective on Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-school success</td>
<td>Opportunity at large</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective on Reach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-centered</td>
<td>Family and community impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation Decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-K focus</td>
<td>Universal focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Summary of the present paper’s argument. Boston’s academic achievement rhetoric concentrates on individual student success in school, heightening an implementation focus on the “pre-Kindergarten” part of UPK. New York City’s citywide equity rhetoric highlights its potential impact on school measures and beyond for students and the community, intensifying a focus on implementing the “universal” part of UPK.
Figure 2. The number of students enrolled, and classrooms utilized, in Boston’s K1 program from 2005-2010 (Sachs, n.d.)

Figure 3. The number of students enrolled in New York City’s Pre-K For All program by household income, from 2013-2015 (University of California Berkeley, 2015).
References


THE POLITICAL RHETORIC OF UNIVERSAL PRE-K

mayor/news/732-14/mayor-de-blasio-appoints-richard-buery-deputy-mayor-strategic-policy-initiatives-pre-k


New York City Department of Education. (2014a, February 11). Testimony of NYC Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina on council resolution supporting the City’s plan to establish high-quality Universal Pre-Kindergarten for all eligible four-year olds and a high-quality after-
THE POLITICAL RHETORIC OF UNIVERSAL PRE-K


THE POLITICAL RHETORIC OF UNIVERSAL PRE-K


University of California Berkeley. (2015, September). NYC brief 5, NYC Pre-K year 2. Retrieved from https://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/docs/NYC%20pre-


