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COMMENTARY

Getting “Critically Real”¹ About the State of Education Politics and Policy Process Research

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The chapters in Section 3: “Politics and the Policy Process” demonstrate the vast range of topics, methods, and epistemological positions that exist in the field. My role, in this commentary, is not to try to create a meta-narrative that encompasses politics and policy processes as we currently understand them. Rather, my role here is as an “Under-Labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish, that lies in the way to knowledge” (Locke, 1690/1997, p. 11). My goals are therefore modest: to characterize the educational politics and policy process research as represented in the chapters in this section and to identify a ‘way to knowledge’ in the future. In so doing, I hope to illustrate the ways that our research can address the common educational concerns of equity, efficiency, student learning, and educational outcomes, resulting in useful guidance for the design of effective educational policies.

To this end, I begin by characterizing educational politics and policy process research as being a “post-normal” policy domain that is dominated by high stakes, uncertain knowledge, and disputes over epistemological positions. Further, the dualistic separation of the field into structural versus agential research camps has rendered us unable to fully address many of the most pressing educational policy problems. I conclude my commentary by arguing for a transdisciplinary approach to educational politics and policy research in order to better address the complexity present in this post-normal domain.

Characterizing the Field as a Post-Normal Research Domain

The chapters in this section identify a series of issues over which there is much agreement in the educational policy process and politics research. The chapters in this section point out the virtual universality of education as a political enterprise:

- Politics and education intersect continually, and a neutral, objective educational practice is thus impossible (Torres & Van Heertum, p. 18).
- Arguments about vouchers have played out in political venues (Mead, p. 15).
- A dynamic set of political trends impacts assessment policy (Lindle, p. 2).

Politics in education, while acknowledged as a fundamental condition, is not considered by all the research to be negative. Jacobsen (this volume, citing Stone et al., 2001, p. 8) suggests that “Politics can also mean ‘activity by which a diverse citizenry reconcile, put aside, or in some manner accommodate their differences in order to pursue their common well-being’” (p. 24). And Honig indicates, “Politics are inherent, unavoidable, and arguably valuable dimensions” (p. 29).

However, many of the chapters have further shown that the political nature of education has expanded to the research itself with negative repercussions:

- [Research studies] often are shaped more by rhetoric and ideology than by disinterested, thorough inquiry (Koppich & Callahan, p. 26).
- The discourse about NCLB assessment was shaped primarily by political elites and national advocacy groups (Lindle, p. 14).
- [Policy research is] based primarily on politics (Smith & Smith, p. 13).
- [Research on collective bargaining is] sparsely populated and frequently polarized (Hannaway & Rotherman, 2006, cited in Koppich & Callahan, p. 5).
- Data is a political prisoner of governments, and we would add, of political ideologies as well (Torres & Van Heertum, p. 46).

In addition to the political aspects of the educational enterprise, each of the chapters identifies a raft of outstanding issues, many of them quite substantive and seemingly of foundational priority. For example, Smith and Smith summarize their chapter by discussing two enduring educational problems: improving achievement for students from low-income families and improving achievement and opportunities for all students. Similarly, West highlights how “gaps in basic skills along lines of ethnicity and income remain alarmingly wide” (p. 1). Jacobsen shows that there has been a steady erosion of public support for education and that this lower confidence is causing both exit and voice on the part of the public, thus imperiling education as a democratic institution.

We also seem to know much about what we do not know and less about how we might address some of these gaps. “The literature reflects a systemic weakness in understanding why reform efforts have not been more successfully sustained” (Datnow & Park, p. 34) and “determining effective instructional practices and measuring learning remains an elusive goal” (Datnow & Park, p. 19). Further, “little work has considered what the people want and why they are dissatisfied with what they are getting” (Jacobsen, p. 4). And, Koppich and Callahan contend, “We do not know nearly as much as we should from available research to be able to extract adequate data and craft worthwhile education policy. Nor do we know nearly as much as we should from available research and data to use the results...to improve education decision-making” (p. 2).

This combination of politics, complexity and the immediacy of problems creates a post-normal policy domain. Funtowicz and Ravetz (1990) have characterized post-normal domains as those in which:

- decisions need to be made before conclusive evidence is available;
- the potential impacts of wrong decisions can be large;
- values are in dispute;
- the knowledge-base is characterized by large uncertainties, multi-causality, knowledge gaps, and imperfect understanding;
- research methods are dominated by models, cases, scenarios, perceptions, assumptions, and extrapolations; and
- hidden values reside in problem framing, chosen indicators and the research assumptions being made.

For example, Rosen (citing Rowan, 1984) characterizes education as an area where uncertainty, social conflict and distress are most evident. And Koppich and Callahan conclude that educational “policy makers are in the unenviable position of designing education policy on the basis of incomplete information, and points of view reinforced by a narrow range of research and stories in the popular press” (p. 26).

A combination of this post-normal situation and our current research practices results in less impact than we

would wish for our research. Lindle, in an analysis of media coverage of assessment and accountability, contends that assessment researchers are portrayed in the coverage as reactors, critics or translators of assessment and accountability policies but rarely as instigators of new ideas. She concludes from her analysis, “In very rare instances, assessment experts promoted policy direction such as expansion of accountability models and formative or summative testing” (p. 22). Smith and Smith also state that we “have very little effect on important educational outcomes” (p. 3).

While the methodologies developing in other post-normal policy contexts such as globalization, global warming, and HIV/AIDS may not be appropriate for studying education, the concept of post-normality is an apt one for the current state of our field. However, in recognizing education as a post-normal policy domain, we must acknowledge that identifying the educational truth in its entirety may be unfeasible; we must let go of our notions of speaking truth to power (Wildavsky, 1987) and expecting truth-based policy to emerge. We are unlikely to address the complex educational needs identified, or those that can be expected to emerge in the future, if we maintain entrenched epistemological positions. The chapters in this section portray a field of policy process and politics research that is dualistic, where research frameworks can be characterized as focusing *either* on the structures that impact education *or* on the agents of/in education.

Structural Versus Agential Dualism in Educational Politics and Policy Processes

The central split in the educational politics and policy process research is between those who appear committed to methodological individualism—the assumption that individuals act independently and make their own choices—and those who are committed to methodological holism—the assumption that structures such as social class, gender, ethnicity and norms limit or influence the opportunities available to individuals. Torres and Van Heertum identify that, “within education, neoliberal reforms have profoundly challenged holistic notions of education, replacing them with instrumental, corporate models” (p. 1). This split is demonstrated both across and within the chapters in this section.

Koppich and Callahan, while discussing theories of the role of unions in the collective bargaining process, illustrate the structural versus agential split. “One theory holds that unions are necessary to preserve and protect teachers’ workplace rights, serve to advance the place of teachers as professionals, and further the cause of educational reform” (p. 1)—an agential notion of the role of unions. “A second and competing theory holds that unions are obstructionist organizations” (p. 1)—a structural notion of the place of unions in the educational context. Mickelson discusses “how students construct their racial identity” (p. 4), assuming an agential notion of race, yet also avows that these self-constructs depend on “social structural features in the student’s environment”

(p. 4). Honig and Datnow and Park illustrate the distinction between agential and structural epistemological positions in research on policy implementation by characterizing the two camps as those favoring “forward mapping” (assuming agency) and those favoring “backward mapping” (assuming structural impediments). Rosen (citing Kertzer, 1988, p. 42) reproduces this split in her own discussion by claiming “In capitalist countries this commonly entails attributing an individual’s power position to his or her individual virtues—for example, intelligence or hard work—rather than conceiving of inequality as created and perpetuated by the economic system itself” (p. 17). Numerous other examples of structural or agential politics and policy process research are found in the chapters in this section. Further examples are provided in Table 32.1 below.

On their own, both epistemological positions lack the capacity to undertake the examination of complex, open systems such as education. And, Honig shows that “Typically, mixed results may stem in part from the different methodologies researchers have used to derive their findings” (p. 2). With the structural research approach, there is a danger of it becoming critique qua critique and failing to achieve its emancipatory aims. Rorty (1989) claims “Socialisation [sic] ... goes all the way down” (p. 185). In relying entirely on a methodology of holism, “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault, 1970, p. 387). Thus, emancipation is asphyxiated by social forces (Archer, 2001).

Stovall illustrates this problem when he discusses the way a structural approach, specifically critical theory, was used in Chicago to help residents critique and ultimately stop the “revitalization” of inner-city neighborhoods and the construction of new schools built to attract middle-class families to them. While this was obviously a successful critique, the neighborhoods are still left unchanged, their residents have not been emancipated from poverty, crime, low expectations, poor schools, and the limited futures

that result from residing in these conditions. The residents stopped the city’s hegemony but were not helped, within this structural approach, to develop a vision and a plan for transformational action. Likewise, in discussing prevalent theories used to account for the racial and ethnic gaps in student success, Mickelson highlights the uniformly structural orientation of these theories—from social reproduction theory to school characteristics to cultural capital to biological determinism. In so doing, Mickelson shows how each theory is unable to fully explain the persistent gap that remains.

Strict reliance on methodological individualism also has limitations. In agential research, we identify a pattern of events representing, hopefully, cause and effect. However, we do not produce a causal law that explains the complete reality of education or schooling. Rather, we produce a causal explanation of our research conditions. Agential research therefore assumes that events occur in a closed system. It thus presupposes that objects of study are intransitive. Agential researchers collapse evidence of reality with reality itself. In so doing, they make it virtually impossible to identify all the mechanisms beyond agency which may account for outcomes and effects.

Rosen identifies the problems with strict agentialism when she describes “policy analyses typically focus[ing] on the purposes and functions of policies and the extent to which they produce the outcomes stated or intended by their creators. This emphasis has led policy analysts to adopt a ‘naïve rationalism’” (p. 1, citing Cohen & Rosenberg, 1977, p. 136). Jacobsen also identifies “fundamental measurement issues with each of the existing surveys which makes it impossible to accurately determine how the public views educational priorities or what the public says it wants from the school system” (p. 14). The main problem with these data “is that people were asked to evaluate one goal in isolation” (p. 15). As Torres and Van Heertum conclude, “attempts to adopt the methods of [agency] have led toward

TABLE 32.1
Structural and Agential Research in Education Politics and Policy Process

Examples of the Structural Approach to Education Politics and Policy Process Research	Examples of the Agential Approach to Education Politics and Policy Process Research
“Marshall McLuhan, in his seminal book <i>Understanding Media</i> , came to a similar conclusion, placing media and technology at the center of reality, controlling individuals who simply adapt to their imperatives and rationality” (Torres & Van Heertum, p. 8)	“Legal scholarship seeks to construct a legal theory that might be used to move jurisprudential thinking in one direction or another” (Mead, p. 5)
Stovall, in discussing gentrification by upper middle-class African-American families in low income African-American neighborhoods, claims, “it should be understood as a complex system of oppressions where members of historically oppressed racial groups can be individually rewarded to enact and enforce the policies of the dominant society.” (p. 17)	Koppich and Callahan discuss the predominant econometric methodology used to analyze teacher collective bargaining contract outcomes but show that this singular method fails to account for the process and contextual variability that mediate these outcomes.
Mickelson (citing Matute-Bianchi 1986, 2008) identifies generational issues, ethnicity, social class, English-language proficiency, and immigration status (all structural conditions) as shaping Latino/a educational achievement, attainment and outcomes (agential conditions). Mickelson also shows that patterns of achievement among Whites are also influenced by the structural conditions of social class and gender.	“Public choice is distinguished from traditional approaches to the study of political behavior by... <i>methodological individualism</i> . The basic unit of analysis is the individual political actor.” (West, p. 1, emphasis in original)

scientism, where intellectual work cultivated by specialists fragmented knowledge and extricated it from broader social phenomena” (p. 25).

The problems identified here go beyond the recognized split between qualitative and quantitative research (Hammersley, 1993; Salomon, 1991; Howe & Eisenhart, 1990) and between post-positivists and post-modernists (Schick, 1999; Schrag, 1992). It requires more than a call for the use of mixed methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) to resolve the post-normal policy problems we face. The dualist split between structural and agential research in education politics and policy process represents epistemological disagreements about knowledge of education which have been acknowledged in the quantitative vs. qualitative and post-positivist vs. post-modernist literature. However, these arguments reproduce the “epistemic fallacy” (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 36) and suppose that the ontology of education itself can be transposed through resolving the epistemological debate. As Datnow and Park successfully argue “Clearly, educational reform involves formal structures, such as district offices, state policies, and so on. It also involves both formal and informal linkages among those structures. Yet, reform involves a dynamic relationship, not just among structures but also among cultures and people’s actions in many interlocking settings. It is this intersection of culture, structure, and individual agency across contexts that helps us better understand how to build positive instances of educational reform” (p. 34).

Integrating the Structural and the Agential in Education Policy Research

At a basic level, elements in education policy research cross the structural and agential divide—it is not an either/or policy domain. The chapters in this section have clearly described the ways in which various aspects of the educational enterprise can act as *both* generative structures that support/impede educational progress *and* as agents responsible for outcomes, effects, and the reproduction of the existing structures. One of the dilemmas identified by Datnow and Park is that “policy can be successfully implemented in terms of fidelity to procedures but executing policy faithfully does not mean that it will produce intended outcomes” (p. 3). Because elements of the educational context cross this “false” divide, research and research outcomes currently appear at odds with one another, with each epistemological position making claims to knowledge supremacy. However, if we start seeing them as each providing part of the puzzle, we may begin to develop a fuller understanding of the multi-causal, multivariate nature of educational politics and policy processes. As the sociologist Margaret Archer (2001) has indicated, “Both humanity and society have their own sui generis properties and powers, which makes their interplay the central issue of social theory for all time” (p. 17).

Many of the authors of the chapters in this section recognize this need and call for such an approach for future research on educational politics and policy processes. Stovall

says, we need “‘engaged researchers’ where theoretical assumptions are secondary to the experiential knowledge of the groups in question” (p. 8, citing Knofke, 1997, p. 61). Koppich and Callahan argue that “both theories have merit and neither alone is entirely accurate ... because the two theories represent opposite poles,” (p. 1) and that “the challenge for researchers is to examine under what conditions some of these assumptions may be true and what other factors interact with these assumptions. The task is daunting but not impossible” (p. 25). Rosen avers that “different models, moreover, draw attention to different kinds of phenomena and away from others. Thus, research methods should be understood as tools for mapping or modeling, not mirroring, the social and natural world” (p. 38).

The Need for Transdisciplinary Research in Education Policy and Politics

Because of the dualistic nature of the research on educational politics and policy, guidance for the design of effective educational policies has been limited. The field suffers from a severe case of epistemic fallacy—where knowledge about education has been confused with the reality of education. This epistemic fallacy results in incomplete understandings of that thing with which we are all concerned—education. While there has been a loud call for more scientific knowledge on education, a primary omission from this call is an understanding of the way scientific knowledge accumulates. Rarely in the natural sciences would you find an instance where one theory, explanation or type of knowledge is simply overthrown by another. Rather, incorporation is the key mechanism of the scientific process—scientists develop more inclusive views of a problem by incorporating new information into previously existing theories (Bhaskar, 1998; Kuhn, 1970).

Natural scientists are also finding themselves with more post-normal scientific problems as well. For example, at the advent of genetic studies, geneticists held out the belief that genes could be identified as specific causal agents for disease. More recently, geneticists have come to understand that a specific disease is often the result of hundreds of different genes interacting with an infinite number of environmental factors. In this vein, psychologists and geneticists working together at the University of Virginia have identified poverty (an environmental factor) as having a negative impact on IQ (a factor thought to be genetic). However, they have been unable to identify specific elements of poverty that have the biggest impact on IQ—in fact, no single poverty factor accounts for much variation in IQ. Ultimately, the researchers conclude that they are not close to identifying a linear causal connection (A leads to B) and because poverty has a holistic impact, they probably never will (Turkheimer, Haley, D’Onofrio, Waldon, & Gottesman, 2003).

Recognizing the cumulative nature of knowledge production and the growing post-normal character of scientific problems, the natural sciences have begun to identify the

need for transdisciplinary research as a way to understand causality. As “trans” indicates, transdisciplinarity² is concerned with that which is between the disciplines, across the disciplines, and beyond each individual discipline. The goal of transdisciplinary research is the understanding of the present world and it assumes that to achieve this, an overarching unity of knowledge is imperative. Transdisciplinarity is not a super- or supra-discipline, it is constituted by disciplinary research. In turn, disciplinary research is furthered and clarified by the cumulative nature of transdisciplinary research. In this sense, disciplinary and transdisciplinary research are not antagonistic but complementary. Transdisciplinary research does not attempt to resolve or dismiss contradictory perspectives of the world, but instead it incorporates multiple viewpoints into the same problem-solving process (Gibbons, Limoges, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1994; Scott & Gibbons, 2001).

Some of the authors in this section have identified the importance of knowledge accumulation to achieving our aims of providing useful guidance to the resolution of post-normal problems in education policy. Honig argues that “the challenge for education policy implementation researchers then becomes how to uncover the various factors that combine to produce implementation results and to *accumulate* enough cases over time to reveal potentially predictable patterns” (p. 17, emphasis added). Smith and Smith show in their chapter that “in most examples of the use of research in policy, no single study can be identified as the principal causal influence. Rather, the *accumulation of knowledge* and relevant examples lead to a gradually increasing understanding” (p. 7, emphasis added). John Dewey also understood the importance of such an approach to educational policy research: “When a certain state of accumulated knowledge, of techniques and instrumentalities is obtained, the process of change is so accelerated, that, it appears externally to be the dominant trait” (Dewey, Hickman, & Alexander, 1998, p. 299).

For educational politics and policy process research to adopt a transdisciplinary approach will require considering more purposefully the ways that structure and agency interplay in educational contexts. It will also mean recognizing more fully “that agents at all levels contribute to the policy making process and that that process is characterized by continuous interaction among agents and actors within and between levels of the system” (Datnow & Park, p. 10) and that “the causal arrow of change travels in multiple directions among active participants in all domains of the system and over time” (Datnow & Park, p. 11). More importantly however, it means recognizing that different types of knowledge are necessary if we are to be more successful. As an example of what is needed, Rosen, in making a case for symbolic analysis of education policy states that it “should complement, rather than supplant, more instrumentally oriented studies” (p. 42).

As Smith and Smith conclude, “Too often we forget the fact that we hold enormous amounts of knowledge about the factors and conditions that enable and support student

learning, make up powerful teaching, motivate or discourage students, and explain why some schools and districts are effective, efficient organizations and why others are not” (p. 16). It is time that the field of educational politics and policy process research remembers this and shifts from a reductionist, dualistic, research-camp mentality toward a transdisciplinary, cumulative field.

Notes

1. This commentary is heavily influenced by my participation in the Principles of Critical Realism for Education Workshop, Sessions I–V, conducted at the Institute of Education, London, July 18–20, 2008, by Roy Bhaskar.
2. Piaget is credited with coining the term *transdisciplinarity* at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) workshop, *Interdisciplinarity—Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities*, held in Nice, France, September 7–12, 1970.

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