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CHAPTER 1

The tension between research of policy and research for policy in an era of transnational education policy making: An introduction

Richard Desjardins

Kjell Rubenson

This book brings together a series of contributions which surround two interrelated topics: 1) recent political economic changes affecting education policy making processes including the ascension of neoliberalism and the transnationalization of education policy making; and, 2) the tension between *research of policy vs research for policy*. Working from different perspectives, the authors help to provide a better understanding of these two important sets of issues which the field of education must contend with today.

The transnationalization of education

The phenomenon of globalization has a number of implications for policy studies in education. As reflected by the broad economic forces and increased liberalisation experienced by most nations today, globalization has placed an increased emphasis on the importance of education. After the Second World War, education began to play a major role in economic and social policy. This was embedded in a Keynesian political economic framework. Since the 1970s however, the political economic context has in most of the industrialized as well as developing world shifted to a neoliberal framework. This coincides with a transnationalization of education, which has altered the landscape of education policy making processes. The outcome of this development has been an increasing tendency to subject most expressions of knowledge production and transmission to economic growth. It has also brought economics of education to the forefront of educational policy making.

The transnationalisation process has renewed the debate on a number of issues that pertain to the way policy studies should be done. This includes the tendency for policy studies to be rooted in the notion of “methodological nationalism”. The latter is a term usually used to refer to the assumption that societies are tied to the boundaries of nation states and hence nations are the appropriate unit of analysis for social sciences (see Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Increasingly, social scientists are focusing on the impact of transnationalization of economic and social policy making (see Mahon

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and McBride, 2008). In education, scholars like Robert Arnove and Carlos Torres (1999) among others have put forth a world systems perspective which has been a valuable resource for understanding world trends in education. Through these and other contributions, policy studies in education have come to recognize the importance of studying the growing phenomena of policy borrowing and policy learning.

Another aspect that has come to the fore is the role of research in education policy making, and more particularly the role of comparative research and the solving of everyday problems facing educational systems. Along with the transnationalization of education, there has been a shift from national collection of data to a demand for international comparative data, which in turn have come to play a role in driving national policy making. Examples of research corresponding to this phenomenon are large scale studies like the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the upcoming OECD Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), both of which emphasize the link between learning, labour markets, and competitiveness. In accordance with these trends, increasing attention has been paid by the scholarly community to understanding the role that international organizations have come to play in national policy making.

The increase in the number of policy related processes which are operating at an international level have served to accentuate the interaction and tensions between educational research and policy. For example, there is an increasing demand for informing and developing these policy processes, including not only information and knowledge needs, but also research designs and tools for developing understandings among relevant actors, as well as for collecting and interpreting empirical observations in such a way as to lead to meaningful implications for education policy and practice. Thus a debate on the functions and utilization of policy oriented educational research is reemerging.

The scientization of policy

In the 1950s, scholars like Lerner and Lasswell (1951) lamented about the need for a development of the policy sciences. Ever since, there has been a general scientization of most policy sectors in

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OECD countries including education politics. With the explosion in public funding for education in the 1960s research became a regular aspect of the educational policy process, particularly in countries with a long tradition of grounding policy recommendations in social science research. In Sweden for example, sector funded research in education had already become an integrated part of large scale school reforms which had started after the Second World War (SOU 1980:2). At its best, this is a positive development that can be encapsulated in the clever aphorism “speaking truth to power” coined by Wildavsky (1979). But this development gave rise to important tensions between research and policy making communities. These tensions exist more generally, but it is particularly acute in the field of education because the research community is itself deeply fragmented and weakly institutionalized.

With this as a backdrop, the recent and ongoing transnationalization of education, has gone hand in hand with renewed pressure and demand by the policy community for policy relevant research or so called *strategic science*, especially of the type that leads to economically useful information, i.e., which informs on resource allocation, management and performance in education. Education systems are coming under increasing pressure to show greater accountability and effectiveness, and by implication so are policy makers and practitioners. At the EU level for example, there are a wide range of mechanisms that have been put in place to support the formation of strategic research initiatives which can foster the conditions needed to fulfill the educational objectives embedded in the Lisbon strategy. As an example at the national level, Denmark has in recent years set up a number of strategic research funds as a way of responding to the challenges of globalization, including one for the educational sector.

But the notion of “strategic science” is not unproblematic. As politics come to rely more heavily on science, the criteria of relevance for research will be defined more narrowly in terms of what is deemed useful for policy. Thus there is a real danger that there will be a further politicization of science (Hoppe, 1999). There are signs that this is indeed the case. For example, not only has free research money been diverted and earmarked for strategic research but also relevance has crept in as criteria for the award of free research funding. Many national research councils can now be seen to impose criteria of policy relevance for what has been traditionally funding for free research. In Canada for example, the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) which has

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traditionally supported free research and been distinct from strategic research, has now begun to impose a criteria of relevance. The same is happening in Australia and other places. This could have the paradoxical consequence that social scientists distance themselves even more from doing policy relevant research.

The renewed pressure for strategic and policy relevant research can be exemplified by the heated debate on the notion of evidence based policy making in education which has emerged in recent years (OECD, 2007). The idea of EBPM is that education policy decisions should be based on the best evidence possible. But decades of policy research has contributed to a realization that evidence based policy making while appealing is not realistic given the nature of education policy making processes. For example, information that is readily available to policy makers is often not suitable or appropriate, either because the research is missing, or because what is available is contradictory and/or does not point to a particular solution. And most importantly, the policy making process is neither rational nor linear. There is ample evidence that research does not get used in a direct and pointed way.

Husén (1985) reminded us that this classical “philosopher – king” model, where the researcher provides the knowledge from which policy makers derive guidelines for action, is problematic as it tacitly assumes consensus about goals. But the issue of what educational systems are suppose to achieve constitutes a *complex* and *ill-defined problem* (Desjardins, 2008). This is because:

- the objectives of education are not always known or clear;
- even if the objectives are explicit, there is no single optimal way to achieving them; and,
- there is insufficient information to allow for adequate debate or solutions to the problem.

The fragmented nature of policy making in conjunction with what Weiss (1977) has called the cognitive limits of government explains some of the limits encountered in using research rationally in the policy process. Instead, research affects the policy makers in more indirect and subtle ways, through an unsystematic incorporation of concepts, data and generalization into the policy maker’s way of thinking. That is to say that research has become part of the policy maker’s tacit knowledge base.

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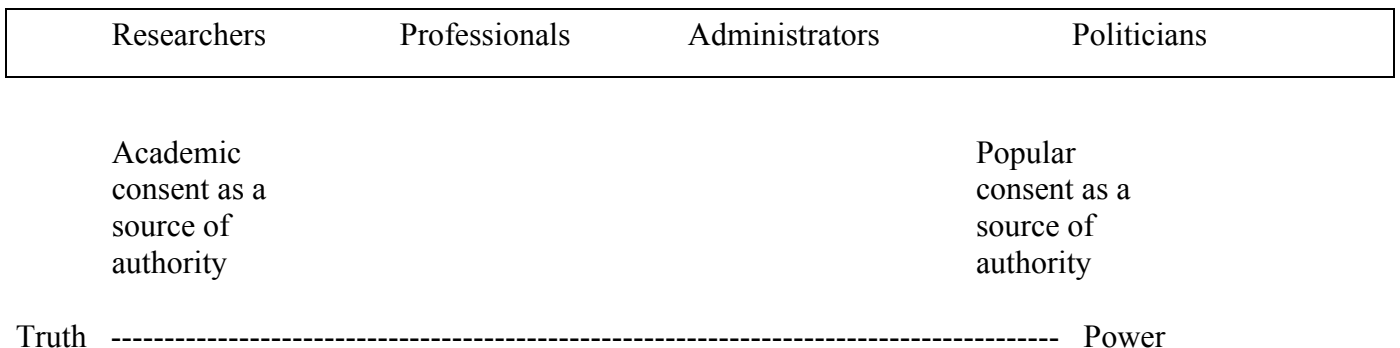
A problem with the indirect way that research results are absorbed by policy makers is that much of what is absorbed may be distorted. Thus, the ways in which research influences the policy process can result in “endarkenment” as well as enlightenment. This emphasis on the indirect effects of research on policy makers does not deny the fact that research in some instances can have a direct and calculated effect on policy decisions.

The two cultures hypothesis

The distinctive nature and purpose of the policy community on the one hand, and the academic research community on the other, and hence the tension between the two, must be recognized. This is best captured by the two cultures hypothesis (see Ginsburg and Gorostiaga, 2001)¹. In summary, theorists and researchers are motivated toward developing knowledge that is objective, factual and truthful, whereas politicians have to ultimately be concerned with being elected and maintaining power, and practitioners are geared toward what works given the task at hand and the contextual circumstances of what needs to be done.

Several authors have framed these tensions with what is perceived to be the different cultures of research and policy making. Much of the discussion departs from what Price (1965) identified as the politically relevant spectrum that goes along the dimension of truth to power. Gustavsson (1984) presents the Price spectrum in the following way:

Figure 1.1



¹ In reality, this is more complex. As Ginsburg and Gorostiaga (2001) point out themselves there are questions on the limited extent and effectiveness of communication between theorists and researchers, on the one hand, and policy makers and practitioners, on the other.

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Legitimizing
claims for
institutional
autonomy

Illegitimate
claims for
institutional
autonomy

The culture of academia to which most theorists and researchers abide to is widely characterized by scholarship that is undertaken in isolation from policy makers and practitioners, and where the choice of topics is driven by long term concerns that have emerged from their own discipline; the language used is often technical and specialized; time constraints are not a factor; and, by a tendency to pay scant attention to current “everyday” problems faced by policy makers and practitioners. The culture of policy makers and practitioners on the other hand, is often characterized by a valuation of research that meets their particular needs, and addresses questions on their agenda; produces results that are consistent with their ideologies; is non-technical and easy to understand; is timely; and, is realistic given the limitations of the everyday situation.

A common criticism of educational research in general is that it has hardly measured up to the challenge of communicating its theoretical knowledge to the relevant policy and practitioner communities in an intelligible and engaging manner. A common explanation is that this is partly because research information is excessively addressed to and designed for other researchers whereas the conveyance of information to practitioners and other interest groups is neglected (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 1993). For example, in Sweden, only between two and four percent of the editorial material in the largest union-affiliated journals in the educational sector was found to be related to research findings (*ibid*). Thus it could be claimed that practitioners lack regular information which is capable – quickly and without people having to read too much – of providing an overview of what is emerging from research. While recognizing that much of the criticism of how researchers present their findings is relevant, it is doubtful whether this can in any significant way explain the under utilization of research. As the chief author of the famous *What Works* pamphlet found out, “print and the dissemination media no matter how skilfully done won’t work” (*Educational Researcher*, 1993, p. 27). A pamphlet that presents recommendations which are validated by quite a lot of research, written with clear language and widely publicized are soon forgotten by central administrators and school principles. What often has been seen as a

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dissemination problem is not really a dissemination problem. Instead, there is an increased awareness that the phenomenon cannot be fully explained by technical factors, such as the form in which research is published, but that it has to be understood in terms of a) the lack of incentives for instructors to use research to change their practice; and b) the very nature of social science research on the one hand, and the policy making process on the other hand. It is the second phenomenon that is of particular interest for what is being discussed here.

The differences between the cultures often leads to a perception of what is referred to as a research-policy gap in which there is a serious mismatch between the interests of researchers and the agendas of policy makers as well as practitioners. A tendency to be over optimistic about the problem solving function of educational research has also accentuated this perception of a research-policy gap. For example, the high expectations of the usefulness of policy oriented social research promoted by politicians, researchers and bureaucrats alike in the early post-War years , were not met, and research and policy making came to be seen as having “an uneasy relationship” (Marklund, 1981). Consequently, the use, non-use and abuse of social research for policy making has become a field of research in itself (Andersson & Biddle, 1991; Bulmer, 1987).

In the scholarly community, one strong position is that engagement in policy research will result in scholars abandoning the “truth-pole” and instead becoming involved in politics. The purist position is embedded in the view that science is the highest embodiment of human rationality. But the notion that research is value free becomes difficult to maintain.

Accepting that research, in and of itself, can express certain normative values, the fundamental issue becomes how publicly supported social criticism (a fundamental role for research) can become compatible with the principle of political democracy. Gustavsson (1984, p.112) provides an illuminating perspective on the issue when he asks: “What gives researchers paid by taxpayers’ money, the right to put into question, during working hours, the correctness of democratically made decisions?” The issue is normative and has to do with how to make publicly supported social criticism compatible with the principle of political democracy. The answer, according to Gustavsson, rests in a paradoxical argument that goes as follows:

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1. The aim of criticism is clarification and demystification with the intention to promote responsible action.
2. Political and other social actions claim to be responsible action.
3. Therefore critical activities cannot themselves be subject to the demand for responsible action, while at the same time they are themselves bound by a demand to demystify.
Thus in order to promote responsible action, critical activities must be irresponsible as far as their external consequences are concerned.

Combining the paradoxical argument with the general principle of self management, that citizens' participation in society's governance must be as large as possible, Gustavsson concludes that scholars with public financial support but without political responsibility can and should devote themselves to criticizing the ends and the means that guide public activities. This means that researchers would have the right to question the very premises on which a policy rests. However, he argues, not only do scholars engaged in policy research have the right to do what the politically responsible cannot do; they have an obligation to do so. What deserves to be defended is the freedom of scholars to freely choose problems, methodologies and freely publish, not the right to avoid working with normative problems.

The two community dilemmas interact with the tension between what could be labelled research *for* policy and research *of* policy.

Problem solving vs critical approach in education policy research

It makes sense to argue that governments can and should inform their policies with the best available evidence as much as possible. But how can this process be improved? Governments are looking to increase the production of relevant research in ministries, but they are also looking to the academic research community, and in some cases adding pressure on academia, particularly in countries where higher education is centrally controlled and financed. Within this context, it is useful to consider more closely the distinction between research *for* policy and research *of* policy, and how these two approaches relate to each other.

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Loosely speaking, the problem solving approach is equivalent to research for policy, while the critical approach is equivalent to research of policy. In the first instance, the problem is usually taken as a given and it is only the solution that is of relevance, whereas in the latter, both the problem itself and the solution are made to be problematic. Cox (1996, p 88-89) drew a distinction between the problem solving and critical approaches, which is essential for understanding the context, value and limitations of the two approaches, but also how the two can complement each other.

The problem solving approach takes the problem as it is. The aim is to make the existing order of social and power relationships, and the institutions in which these are embedded to function smoothly by resolving the problems that face or threaten this overall context. This simplifies the task at hand, and makes it easier to arrive at results which appear to have general validity. This is in contrast to the critical approach. Here the emphasis is on taking a step outside of the prevailing order of the world and ask how that order came about. The origin of institutions and social power relations, whether they are changing and what is causing those changes, are brought directly into question. The task is to understand the processes of change by constructing the whole rather than sub-dividing the problem into separate parts and limiting the issue to be dealt with.

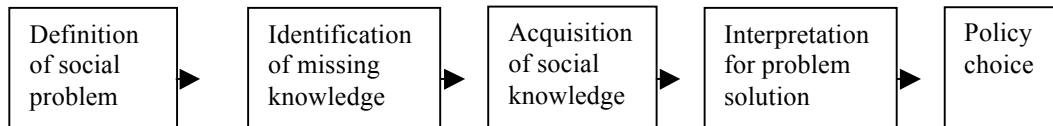
A similar analogy has been made between the instrumental and conceptual functions of research, but here more scope is given to the instrumental function. Naturally, the instrumental view is anchored in the ethos of the policy and practitioner communities. It is based in a belief that policy-oriented or policy-relevant research can be directly applied to policy decisions and practice, although as mentioned there is ample evidence to suggest that this is more of an exception rather than the rule. According to this view, educational policy research should among other things:

- give rise to new organizational models
- give rise to administrative rules and routines
- influence the curriculum
- introduce new instructional methods
- create new teaching aids.

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In each of these cases, research provides the facts which are then used to inform policy decisions. Weiss (1977) has called this approach the engineering or problem-solving model, which can be illustrated in the following way:

Figure 1.2



The instrumental position is deeply rooted in the traditional concept of Research and Development (R&D). Further, instrumentalism is based on the natural sciences and assumes a linear development from basic research via applied research and development to application of new technology. It assumes a positivistic view of knowledge and a trust in quantitative methods (Torgersen, 1986). As Weiss and others have pointed out, the social sciences differ fundamentally from the natural sciences and as a result do not tend to lend themselves to a linear transformation as assumed in the R&D process (Weiss, 1977). Further the model is subject to criticism for making naive and simplistic assumptions about how policy and practice are determined (Weiss, 1987).

The “conceptual position” developed as a criticism against the narrow interpretation of instrumentalism. The role of research is not primarily seen as coming up with a solution and/or answer to a specific issue but rather helps develop a broader understanding of the underlying problem. This involves widening the debate, reformulating the problem, clarifying goals, and analyzing eventual conflicts between multiple goals. Instead of being of direct instrumental use, the primary function of research is conceptual. The conceptual approach involves a shift from shorter R&D projects in education to long-term university based research programs giving emphasis to the relations between education and society as a whole (Marklund, 1981). The conceptual position is in line with the “enlightenment” model which stresses the indirect and complex process through which social research has an impact on the policy process. According to Weiss, the major impact of social research on the policy making process is not through a direct application of research to policy but through the way it over time comes to shape the way policy makers and administrators come to think about social issues (Weiss, 1977). The impact is not always intentional but comes about as a result of long-term involvement with social science concepts.

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Thus the problem solving approach is essential for improving education, especially as it pertains to the practical constraints of time, space and resource use, but it is not enough. Critical research is necessary for identifying new concepts and examining old and new relationships that would otherwise be difficult to observe. The latter is particularly useful for studying whether things are changing, the factors causing change and what the implications of the change might be. Still, an important question remains, which is how can critical research be understood better by all to be valuable and translated better into meaningful knowledge that responds to the needs of education policy making?

Overview of contributions

It is against this backdrop that this book analyses recent political economic changes affecting education and the potential role of research in education policy making. The book is divided into two main sections: the tension between research of policy and research for policy; and exploring the transnationalization of education policy.

A. The tension between research of policy and research for policy

The first contribution by Richard Desjardins outlines the overarching theme and common thread of the book, namely that education policy is increasingly exposed to the dominance of economic policy. The chapter provides an overview of major developments since the 1950s which have contributed toward this trend. The author concludes that the heightened emphasis of education for economic policy has deep consequences for the future of education and educational research. In particular, that the critical and problem solving approaches of educational research should strive to complement each other, and that critical research should place more emphasis on putting forward viable solutions, whether dealing with specific problems in education or broader structural problems in society.

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Within this context, the remaining part of this first section features a series of contributions that discuss the role of research in education policy making. Ben Levin begins by suggesting that governments are displaying increasing interest in stronger connections between research, policy and practice. But he underscores that this tendency must be understood as part of the dynamics of politics and government. Political dynamics present governments with unique challenges to decision-making as a result of diverse and inconsistent views and unpredictable events, among other reasons. Research, while of growing importance in public policy, is rarely the final arbiter of political decisions. It has impact primarily through larger social and political processes. The particular contribution of researchers is to bring evidence and careful thinking into the inevitably messy process of public learning.

Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller extend this by considering the concept of evidence based policy making. In their chapter they examine some of the reasons for the resurgence of interest in evidence, outline the relationships which determine the interactions between policy and research, briefly discuss capacity-building and methodological issues, and they identify the role of brokerage agencies as significant.

Jens Rasmussen considers the role of education policy research from the contemporary sociological perspective in which societies are functionally differentiated. Based in a more formal approach, he extends the notion that the research, policy and practice communities are driven by distinct objectives. He relates this discussion to the issue of relevance, purpose and methodology in educational research.

In her contribution, Judith Walker addresses the question of the “role of critical policy analysis in policymaking” and concludes that, for a number of reasons, that role is virtually non-existent. Among the reasons provided are the nature of the post-structuralist paradigm, academic pressures, lack of communication and understanding between government and academics and also poor understanding of the political system. On this basis she argues for a return to more critical rather than post-modern approaches; an increased awareness and understanding of “agenda setting” and how political systems work; placing more importance of putting forward solutions, “framing” what

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we want, and engaging with the media and with the political system; and, a “decentred unity” of progressive policy analysts that help in countering regressive, neo-liberal policy.

B. Exploring the transnationalization of education policy

The final section features a series of contributions which describe and analyse specific international policy related processes in education, with special emphasis on processes relevant to OECD and European Union countries. The purpose of the section is to orient the reader toward current trends in the functioning of these processes – from both a substantive and critical point of view. Stavros Moutsios begins by reviewing the processes, directions, agendas and aims of various transnational processes as well as their impact on national policy making in education. Collectively, the section emphasizes that through these processes, contemporary education policy making is now subjecting most expressions of knowledge production and transmission to economic growth.

Kjell Rubenson extends this further by examining in more detail how the political project on lifelong learning has evolved from the late 1960s to the present time and its role on national policies. During the period, competing understandings on lifelong learning have been promoted and his chapter explores the competing discourses informing the different positions. It also addresses how the understanding of lifelong learning has been impacted by a changing political economy. The chapter ends with a reflection on the role of research in the formation of intergovernmental and national lifelong learning policies.

In his chapter, Risto Rinne studies changes in the steering and governance of universities in the context of transnationalization. He considers the critical role that universities play in driving power relationships in the late modernity, and how international organizations, which are driven by the neoliberal doctrine and strive to accommodate capital and the market, are striving to harness the power of the university to secure its function as a driver of economic growth, rather than allow it to retrench into its more traditional role as an autonomous institution and protectorate of privileged status.

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Pia Cort explores the nature and implications of the Copenhagen process and the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination in European vocational education and training (VET) policies. She looks at whether the process is influencing and framing the development of national VET policies or not. The analysis rests on three perspectives: a historical perspective aimed at understanding European VET policies and the changes taken place with the adoption of the Copenhagen Declaration; a theoretical discussion of the Open Method of Coordination as a policy tool; and a case study of the Open Method of Coordination in action.

In the final chapter, Peter Grootings and Søren Nielsen discuss the issue of policy learning in the context of transnationalization. It locates policy learning at the centre of transnational processes. From this perspective, how can international assistance, such as that provided by agencies like the European Training Foundation, better contribute to sustainable reforms of national education systems. It is suggested that international policy advisers should be learning from the changing paradigm that has affected the teacher/trainers-student relationship, namely the need to shift from being transmitters of knowledge towards becoming facilitators of learning. If systemic policy reform is about national stakeholders having – and being willing – to actively learn new policies rather than being told what to do, then international advisers should take proper notice of the shift in emphasis from “education” to “learning”, and hence the concept of “policy learning”, rather than policy subversion.

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