

Tackling Education Policy Perils for Public Education Today

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Abstract

This panel will tackle pressing policy issues facing public school education. These include the commercialization and marketization of public schooling, standardization of curriculum and assessment, and the internationalism of academic achievement through misleading rankings. Educational leadership programs can use this research compilation to foster critical awareness of the policymaking environment.

**The text appearing in blue font clarifies the authors who will be presenting at this NCPEA panel.*

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this panel is to provide focused commentary and analysis of some of the most pressing policy issues facing public school educators today. Another purpose is to provide recommendations from leading scholar-practitioners on ways to navigate serious policy challenges such as the commercialization of public schooling, standardization of curriculum and assessment, and the policy pressures brought on by international rankings of academic achievement. The panelists will describe and analyze an important, current education reform policy issue. Contributors will also make evidence-informed practical recommendations for educators and policymakers on how to better approach the policy issues presented so that public education can be improved for all children.

The panel will present three contributions from an “in press” edited volume covering seven chapters. The book itself is separated into three sections, with each section providing at least two research-based practical essays on one of these three policy topics.

- Education Leadership in the Current Policy Environment
- Questioning the Influence of International Testing on Education Policy
- State and National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Perils

Like the three contributions to be presented, each of the seven chapters presents an important policy topic and critical analysis of a pertinent education reform policy issue from the perspective of experienced educators involved in teacher and administrator preparation. Each author uses his or her experiential lens to examine the ongoing tensions between ideologically driven education reform policy and empirical research findings to provide the reader with a volume of critical reviews about current policy issues and recommendations for education policy and practice.

Education Leadership in the Current Policy Environment

1: *The Rhetoric and Reality of School Reform: Organizational Behavior and Competitive Incentive*

2: *Corporate Networks and Their Grip on the Public School Sector and Education Policy* (C. A. Mullen, to be presented at NCPEA)

3: *Leading in a Socially-just Manner: It's What Works for Every Child* (M. A. Rodriguez, to be presented at NCPEA)

Questioning the Influence of International Testing on Education Policy

4: *PISA, PISA Everywhere: The Policy Influence of the International Assessment Regime*

5: *Shanghai Success and the Policy Fallacy of International Assessments of System Performance*

State and National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Perils

6: *Texas' New Science and Mathematics Graduation Requirements: Opportunity or Obstruction?*

7: *We Can Predict your Test Results: Stop Using Them to Drive Education Policymaking* (C. H. Tienken, to be presented at NCPEA)

Below are the chapters appearing in the book; the sections in blue font indicate who is presenting what content at the panel session.

Leadership in the Current Policy Environment

The Rhetoric and Reality of School Reform: Organizational Behavior and Competitive Incentive

Christopher Lubiencki & Paul Myers, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

The notion of choice in schooling represents an appealing vision for politically engaged parents and communities to cast their lots with educational reformers to change the present conditions of schooling in the United States. This is, in part, due to the campaigning by reformers for changes that reorient public schooling toward free market principles and privatization, which implicitly embraces a competitive institutional environment for schools, which must compete for the choices of consumers. Reformers propose and enact measures such as charter schools, vouchers, tuition tax credits, and accountability policies to create a schooling marketplace for families. Yet, by reformers' own logic, a menu of choices alone cannot produce improved educational outcomes, and thus, only partially fulfills the goal of market-making within and privatizing of education. Indeed, for market mechanisms to function properly, choice must be exercised within a competitive marketplace, since competitive incentives are thought to shape organizational behavior in ways that benefit consumers (service users) individually, as well as taxpayers and society overall. Drawing upon previous research, we review and examine the deployment of school choice rhetoric as an enticement to families and its implications for educational leadership. We then argue that *competition* is the *tacit* driving ethos of school reform. We explain the inverted relationship between competition and choice presently in

education and its implications for school personnel and policy. This paper seeks to broaden the role of educational leadership faculties' role in correcting informational asymmetries for aspiring administrators.

Corporate Networks and Their Grip on the Public School Sector and Education Policy

Carol A. Mullen, Virginia Tech, Professor of Educational Leadership, camullen@vt.edu

As leading educational leadership researcher English (2014) declares, “American corporate leadership is an extraordinary, well-financed, determined group of corporate millionaires and billionaires that are financing a self-serving, destructive doctrine on school leaders and public education in America (p. 51). In today’s education policy environment, well-intentioned people are trying to improve public schools. But, they need support from activists. Committed educators and stakeholders are hitting a wall, so to speak: “The only pathways they can see are too often ones prescribed and scripted by others,” meaning that they lack the freedom to use their expertise and capacities to develop learner-centered programs (Bogotch & Shields, 2014a, p. 2). Public education in the United States and around the world needs to be defended, as does our right as taxpaying citizens to keep it public (English, 2010, 2014). Who will have the moral courage to protect this sector from the dominance of excessively financed networks and affluent advocates from the political right and left?

Coalescing around this overarching question, my purposes for this writing are (1) to identify major corporate networks and how they function in the public education sphere, (2) to reveal the influence of self-interest groups on the public school sector and education policy, and (3) to explain some of the complexities and nuances involved in the marketization movement.

Three specific questions that stem from these purposes inform this writing:

1. What networks and entities are driving current school reform in the United States, and how are they affecting public education enterprise?
2. Whose interests are served by extracting revenues, labor pools, and services from the nation’s public school system?
3. What are the implications of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for social democracy and social justice in terms of “equality” and “justice” in education?

I use the original concept “Public Education, Inc.” as a critical framework for this discussion. My writing strategy involves tracing some connections among markets in an effort to evoke a bigger picture of the neoliberal movement’s takeover of public education. Because the markets and their influence are largely invisible, tracing interconnections among for-profit corporations and their supporting cast of characters is a complicated task. A proliferating number of neoliberal corporations, councils, and sponsors that favor free-market education reforms have coopted public school rhetoric. By feigning a deep stake in public education and democracy, these entities hide their true intentions of making money and directing education policy.

References

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Leading in a Socially-just Manner: It's What Works for Every Child

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Abstract

Leading for social justice is a goal that every school leader must seek to attain in order to make a positive impact in the lives of children and youth that walk through their school doors. The author will focus the chapter discussion on the tenets of social justice that permeate the scholarly literature related to educational leadership. The scope of empirical research surrounding social justice leadership in recent years has yielded valuable findings that reflect the behaviors of school leaders who espouse this leadership style and philosophy. The chapter will specifically address the need for leaders to practice social justice in ways that will help them to effectively meet the needs of students in both academic and emotional ways. Such leaders can create a climate of learning that is conducive to the growth and development of all children. The goal of the chapter is to present a synthesis of social justice research and theoretical perspectives within an evolving demographic make-up of students in US schools like English Learners (ELs). Traditionally marginalized students like ELs are part of a vulnerable population that can directly benefit from the practice of social justice leadership in schools. A secondary yet complimentary focus of this chapter is to consider ways in which principal preparation programs can help to prepare future school leaders to become social justice leaders.

Questioning the Role of International Testing in Education Policy

PISA, PISA Everywhere: The Policy Influence of the International Assessment Regime

Svein Sjøberg, University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This work challenges the emergence of a global educational reform movement, where the OECD, through its PISA project, has become the key driver. PISA and its focus on league tables and rankings influence educational debates and educational policy in many countries. The OECD is, with PISA as the main instrument, emerging as a kind of global ministry of education, promoting its own standardized curriculum and system of quality assessment. In this way the OECD operates in close contact with the world's largest commercial company in the education sector, Pearson Inc. to increase its reach on all sectors of education resources.

The success of PISA as an instrument of governance is outlined in several ways. The chapter identifies the PISA-like instrument, "PISA for Schools" as a tool developed to extend PISA's influence to the local contexts, at the school and school district levels. Another new OECD project is PIIAC ("PISA for adults"), measuring knowledge and skills among adult populations along the same dimensions as PISA so as to begin to influence to the adult job market. PISA is now becoming an instrument to compare competencies in the workforce on a global scale, also creating panic in the countries that are not near the top on the rankings.

The increasing role taken by the OECD through the PISA instruments is to push aside the influence of international organizations with different agendas and ideals, like UNESO and UNICEF. In many countries, the PISA results are used to legitimize market-driven education and social policies, such as control of the teachers, payment by test results for teachers and principals, and erosion of the public school system through the privatization and the introduction

of more testing regimes. Examples of this development will be given, and it will be shown how this development runs contrary to evidence on the efficacy of market reforms in education.

Shanghai Success and the Policy Fallacy of International Assessments of System Performance¹

Yong Zhao, University of Oregon

Abstract

PISA may have met its Waterloo in Shanghai. The international assessment program operated by OECD that has evolved into a de facto shadow government shaping education policy around the world may soon see its force disappearing, even ending. Ironically, what is poised to undo PISA's influence is its newly minted and massively celebrated education star—Shanghai, which is considering dropping out of the program. While PISA had always been criticized and questioned, but it was not until Shanghai was granted the best education system by PISA in 2008 when the criticism and questioning began to gain momentum. More important, while prior questioning was mostly about its technical inadequacies, Shanghai exposed PISA's fundamental flaw—an outdated definition of educational quality.

When Finland was the superstar in the PISA world, most people accepted it and the Finns were mostly in agreement and proud. But when Shanghai replaced Finland, there were more doubts outside China and little celebration inside China. The Chinese parents, students, teachers, education leaders, researchers, and policy makers generally hold a much less rosy view of their education than OECD. In fact, the Chinese education, Shanghai included, has been cursed as the world's worst education system for a long time. Numerous efforts have been devised and implemented to reform the system, aiming to dismantle the very elements PISA has praised as primary contributing factors of Shanghai's success.

In other words, the Shanghai success is but an illusion created by PISA. Supporting the illusion are simply three test scores. It is utterly shocking and embarrassing to see some otherwise rational and well-educated people (or at least they should be) in powerful positions believe that three test scores show the quality of their education systems, the effectiveness of their teachers, the ability of their students, and the future prosperity of their society. Nonetheless, PISA has somehow garnered the power to create arresting illusions of excellence in the education universe.

This chapter provides an in-depth view of how PISA scores are influenced and shaped at the micro-level by selective sampling, demographic trends, and overall education policy in the most populous country on the planet. Recommendations are made for education policy and educator practice in the US based on lessons learned about PISA scores in Shanghai.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Perils

Texas' New Science and Mathematics Graduation Requirements: Opportunity or Obstruction?

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¹ Adapted from Zhao's book *Who's Afraid of Big Bad Dragon: Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education in the World* (Jossey-Bass, 2014).

Abstract

In the spring of 2013, the Texas legislature passed House Bill 5 (HB5), a package of reforms that substantially changed the high stakes tests students would need to complete high school and also changed high school course requirements. The reform meant the end of the “4 by 4:” four years each of science, mathematics, language arts, and social studies, that had been at the center of the previous recommended high school graduation plan. The new graduation requirements were based upon a Foundation topped with Endorsements. The courses in the Foundation plan were minimal, whereas the Endorsements allowed substantial freedom for students to construct different paths through high school. For mathematics and science, on which I will focus, the most striking change was that Algebra II, Chemistry, and Physics, which previously were required by default, no longer were, even for students seeking a STEM Endorsement. The Texas Education Agency implemented the legislation in such a way as to push most students back to Algebra II after all. I will explain why I think this was a proper policy reflection of the minimal education US public education owes its citizens, college-bound or not. I will also discuss the unexpected coalition that successfully fought to reduce testing and graduation requirements. Similar coalitions in states other than Texas might build successful campaigns against the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards.

We Can Predict your Test Results: Stop Using Them to Drive Education Policymaking

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Abstract

The ubiquitous use of standardized test results to drive portions of education accountability schemes such as those found in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the NCLB waivers program, teacher and administrator evaluation programs, high school graduation eligibility, and grade promotion now pervade education policy making. Education bureaucrats from a majority of the states volunteered the public school students, teachers, and school administrators of their states to participate in one of two national testing programs: Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC). It is now clear that data generated from these new national assessments will be used in a high-stakes manner to judge student, teacher, and school administrator performance in at least the almost 40 states granted No Child Left Behind ([NCLB], 2002) waivers by the United States Department of Education.

However, the results of standardized tests can be predicted, with high levels of accuracy, by community and family demographic factors easily found in US Census data. A problem exists when bureaucrats and educators use the results from high-stakes standardized assessments to measure the quality and success of school district personnel or students, especially when they fail to accurately control for the influences of family and community demographic variables on the test results.

This work presents the results of statewide studies conducted in New Jersey and Connecticut in which we predicted the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the state tests in grades 3-8 using only community and family demographic factors. We end the chapter by making concrete recommendations for policy and practice.

Introducer and Commentator (Foreword [draft] to book)

Fenwick W. English, R. Wendell Eaves Distinguished Senior Professor of Educational Leadership, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The chapters in *Education Policy Perils* connect linguistic form and content with social and cultural beliefs and practices. The result is a concise, readable, forceful response—a potent source of resistance to the abdication of social justice which we are witnessing in the neoliberal assault on all forms of the left hand of the state in many countries of the world in our times. It would be hard for me to imagine a timelier and more needed text for all of us deeply engaged in the struggle to retain a vision of the common school for all of the children of all of the people.

To elaborate, this compact volume represents a gem in the rich craft of discourse analysis which, as Fairclough (1992) laid out, connects language use to social and cultural processes and the practice of “using language analysis as a method for studying social change” (p. 1).

That we are in a period of profound social and cultural change in public education is attested by the continuing frontal attacks on teacher unions, schools of education, and democratic governance as represented in the tradition of the American school board. Let us not overlook in this era of rapid change the corporatization and privatization of what Bourdieu (1999) called “the left hand of the state” (p. 183). The left hand is represented in public schools and social welfare agencies. These are being cut back or dismantled to the logic of the marketplace. The erasure of the idea of public service as a kind of “professional disinterestedness based on militant devotion” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 184) is happening in our lifetime.

Fairclough set forth four criteria for linking language analysis to social and cultural change, all of which are an integral part of this coedited book. They are:

1. It would have to be a method which was multidimensional in that it would show the relationship between language and the “social properties of texts ... to instances of social practice” (p. 8).
2. It would have to be multifunctional analysis to include a change in knowledge which would include “beliefs and common sense, social relations and social identities” (p. 8).
3. It would have to be a method which included historical analysis and the idea of intertextuality in which some texts are linked to others in specific ways which then “depend upon and change with social circumstances” (p. 9).
4. It would have to be “critical” in that it should show “connections and causes which are hidden; it also implies intervention, for example providing resources for those who may be disadvantaged through change” (p. 9).

The chapters are studded with examples of all four of Fairclough’s criteria for connecting linguistic form and content with social and cultural beliefs and practices. The result is a concise, readable, forceful response—a potent source of resistance to the abdication of social justice we are witnessing in the neoliberal assault on all forms of the left hand of the state in many countries of the world. It would be hard for me to imagine a timelier and more needed text for all of us deeply engaged in the struggle to retain a vision of the common school for all children.

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