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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the complexity of the politics of education and the difficulty of dealing with 19,000 districts and fifty States, each of which is relatively unique. A case is made for increased research efforts in this field. (LLR)

STRATEGIES FOR RESEARCH: THE
POLITICS OF EDUCATION *

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The politics of education is a fledgling area of research whose development of a distinctive empirical base and methodological approach lies in the future. As recently as 1959 Thomas Eliot urged beginning of inquiry in the field, and AERA did not form an interest group until 1969. This is despite the vast amount of money spent on public education (about \$39 billion) and its crucial importance in state and local budgets.

The reasons for this slow development of inquiry are treated in an earlier paper co-authored by the writer.¹ The task now is to discuss research priorities and develop promising methods for attaining research goals. The selection of research problems should no longer be inhibited by a professional ideology that education is a unique function of government. This earlier ideology supported a separate politically independent structure that would remain uninvolved in politics while avoiding conflict among school professionals. Indeed the closed system of education policy making of another era is collapsing under external and internal forces. In this respect, the time is propitious for our efforts, but our late start and lack of theory and methods will continue to pose obstacles.

The group involved in the politics of education is small (about 50) and some of those continue research commitments elsewhere in education or other policy areas. Moreover, the expansion of our research interest group is occurring at a time when government research grants are declining and foundations subjected to taxes. These disconcerting trends call for some research priority setting to maximize our limited manpower and financial support. Accordingly, the writer will outline some priorities and then move to research methods that might help us achieve these priorities.

Within these research priorities there are three general types of questions that need to be considered.

1. Behavioral - How do men behave? What explains different behavior? The research methods for answering such questions are usually case studies, surveys, and quantitative analysis of aggregate data.

¹See Michael W. Kirst and Edith K. Mosher, "The Politics of Public Education: A Research Review," Review of Educational Research (Dec., 1969)

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2. Normative - How should men behave? What is a "good school" or a proper form of educational government? The methods for this type of research are usually drawn from logic, philosophical interpretation, etc.

3. Prescriptive - Given a gap between how men do and should behave, how do we act so as to attain the normative goals? The research methods here are in part behavioral to provide empirical assumptions for prescription. But normative methods are also needed to provide guides that assure means do not destroy ends.

Each of the research priorities suggested below should be considered in this framework.

SOME RESEARCH PRIORITIES

There is a critical need to explore the political relationships and interaction between the various levels and branches of government in education. David Colton has pointed out, for example, the lack of theory and meager data that identifies or explain the conditions under which local schools respond to state directives.² Many political studies overlook completely the influence of the judiciary on education policy making. Yet, its influence on such areas as integration and religion is evident.

But the problem is much more complex than the omission of a particular level or institution from our analyses. It would be very helpful if we knew the exogenous and internal influence configuration for just one large school system. What areas of education policy, for example, are responsive to which of these possible exogenous forces: federal, state, and local government executives, the Congress, state legislature, city council, the federal-state court system, state school boards, producers of textbooks and educational hardware, community groups, institutions of higher education, and private interest groups such as the Catholic Conference or the John Birch Society? Moreover, we need to consider in light of these exogenous variables, the configuration of internal influence among the superintendent, the numerous bureaucratic offices, teachers, and students. These exogenous and internal political variables could then be related to specific policy areas (personnel, facilities, integration, etc.) in order to get a view of the overall political system.

Undoubtedly, these political interactions are exceedingly complex and difficult to discover. However, the specification of components of a complex system is not impossible. Economists, for instance, have made significant progress on building input-output models of large parts of the economic system. Political systems may not be as easy to measure and differ in many respects from economic systems. Educational-political systems are probably to some degree unique, and do not lend

²See "State Power and Local Decision-Making in Education," a paper presented at AERA, Los Angeles, Cal., Feb., 1969.

themselves readily as units for the application of meticulous techniques of observation and disciplined processes of statistical inference. Yet efforts to this end are not absent. Ira Sharkansky and others have applied macro-analytic techniques to state and urban policy outputs, including education.³ It may be that groups of districts will fit into political patterns which can be then analyzed for the independent variables accounting for the differentiation in patterns.

In essence, the writer is advocating a priority to bridging the gap between microanalysis and macroanalysis. We need to make sense of the whole political system in education. We need to use our data on elements of it in the construction of more solidly based conceptions of the entire educational-political system (or major parts of it). If we go down the road of specialization by levels of the federal system, for instance, we will delay our efforts to array in ordered fashion the larger political system or substantial parts of it. The federal system is more like a marble cake than a layer cake. In short, in our research we should stress the interrelations of the educational-political system and de-emphasize description of the particular. As a reviewer of this paper remarked, "We need fewer case studies of pebbles on the beach and more analysis of the beach's ecology."

THE SCHOOL BUREAUCRACY AND INNOVATION

Of this total educational-political system, we have only begun to probe what occurs politically within the local school bureaucracy. Many of the earlier political studies tended to consider the superintendent and the school bureaucracy as a single aggregate entity, and to compare its influence with the school board, the mayor, and the community. This conceptual approach overstates the political leverage of the superintendent and obscures the roles of the associate and district superintendents, curriculum supervisors, and department heads. These "middle level managers" may, in fact, hold much of the superintendent's reputed power or have the ability and inclination to frustrate implementation of his policies.⁴

This concern with the influence of the bureaucracy is related to the critical need for more research into the politics of innovation in schools. The federal government and foundations have spent large sums for curriculum development, and virtually nothing on the network and techniques of political influence that must be used if the curriculum packages are to be implemented in classrooms. Our curriculum developers need political guidance to enlist those within the school system who have "clout".

³See for instance, Ira Sharkansky and Richard I. Hoffenbert, "Dimensions of State Politics, Economics, and Public Policy". American Political Science Review, LXIII (September, 1969), pp 867-880.

⁴See David Rogers, 110 Livingston Street (New York: Random House, 1969).

In addition, outside forces like community groups must be mobilized to pressure for innovation.

COMMUNITY CONTROL AND POLITICS

The struggle for community control of educational policy making is by definition political. Is it indeed true that if the community is to gain control the school professional must lose power? The issue of community control, moreover, is surrounded by confusion over concepts and terms starting with the words "community" and "control". Obviously, this is an example of why we need to employ normative and prescriptive analysis to supplement empirical methods. Only through all three types of research can we provide a coherent and comprehensive model of community control of education. For example, what must the community control if it is, in fact, going to control educational policy? What would classical political theory add to this concept? The classical theorists spent a considerable amount of effort defining "community", "representation", and "power". Finally, what limits are imposed in a normative model by such entities as state and federal governments, the lack of time community board members have to oversee operations, and other similar constraints?

STATE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

Recent trends indicate that the states are gaining in influence relative to the other federal partners. More federal aid will be consolidated into bloc grants or transferred directly through revenue sharing. Reliance on the local property tax will lessen with a consequent increased use of state sales and income taxes to finance education. Yet state politics of education remains largely unexplored except for case studies of some state aid formulas. Laurence Iannaccone has done a masterful job in synthesizing these cases but the eleven state base of the studies was not broad enough.⁵ In California, for instance, there is a vast detailed state education code prescribing curriculum, extra-curricular activities, teacher qualifications, textbooks and so on. Existing studies of basic state aid formulas do not even consider these other areas of educational policy. Moreover, the State Department of Education and the State Board remain largely unknown quantities from the standpoint of political analysis.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

The concept of political culture is related to this concern with comparative state politics of education. In this context, Samuel Patterson defines political

⁵ See Laurence Iannaccone, Politics In Education (New York: The Center for Applied Research In Education, Inc., 1967).

culture as the sharing of beliefs, symbols, and values about the political system by the people of a particular state.⁶ This includes such things as ways people feel toward political institutions and leaders, standards used to set the general goals of the political system, and patterns of political loyalty and commitment in the political system.

The states can be analyzed as relatively independent political systems with political cultures that are distinctive. We have very little data on the particular characteristics of the various state political cultures but V. O. Key observed as long ago as 1950:

The political distance from Virginia to Alabama must be measured in light years. Virginia's deference to the upper orders and the Byrd machines' restraint of popular aberrations give Virginia politics a tone and a reality radically different from the tumult of Alabama. There is a wholesome contempt for authority and a spirit of rebellion akin to that of the Populist days that resists the efforts of the big farmers and "big mules" - the local term for the Birmingham industrialists and financiers - to control the state. Alabamians retain a sort of frontier independence, with an inclination to defend liberty and to bait the interests.⁷

These same type of differences in political culture appear to apply to the politics of education and affects distinctively how education politics is played or pursued. A fruitful area of research would be patterns of interstate variation in political culture and the correlates of this variability.

Several researchers have explored the distinctive political culture that surrounded public education around 1960. Wallace Sayre termed it the "schoolman's political myopia" and Iannaccone, "politics preferred by pedagogues".⁸ The essence of political culture in an earlier period was: education is a unique function of government that must have its own separate and politically independent structure. The administration of education should be uninvolved in "politics" and professional unity should be the norm.⁹

⁶Samuel C. Patterson, "The Political Cultures of The American States", Journal of Politics, 30, (Feb., 1968), pp 187-209. See also: Daniel J. Elazar, American Federalism: A View from the States, (New York: Crowell, 1966). Marion Pearsall, "Cultures of the American South", Anthropological Quarterly, 39 (1966), pp 128-141. Norvall D. Glenn & J. L. Simmons, "Are Regional Cultural Differences Diminishing?" Public Opinion Quarterly, 31 (1967), pp 176-193.

⁷V. O. Key, Southern Politics, (New York: 1950) p. 36.

⁸See Wallace B. Sayre, "The Politics of Education", Teachers College Record (Nov., 1963), pp 178-183.

It is my impression that this political orientation has been changing and is most useful in a historical sense. The political activities of teachers, for example, in 1970 are vastly different from 1960. We need to know more about the dynamics of this changing political orientation and how it is affecting patterns of political behavior. For example, an NEA national poll of teachers asked the following question, "In your opinion, should teachers on their own time work actively as members of political parties in national, state, and local elections?" The affirmative response rose from 23% in 1956, to 54% in 1966, and by 1968 was over 75% (NEA Press Release of October 18, 1968).

SUMMARY

The research priorities discussed above subsume a strategy of working simultaneously on basic research in understanding the larger educational-political system and application of our existing knowledge and techniques to specific, pressing national problems. This latter task will involve normative and prescriptive methods. While our work would be greatly facilitated by the existence of theories in political science, this discipline has been marked by a "high information level and low theoretic yield".¹⁰ The behavioral movement in political science was essentially concerned with empirical methods and was not caused by breakthroughs in operational theory. This will probably force us to stress applied research and delay the development of macro-analysis. It will also require the transfer of theories and concepts from sociology, economics, anthropology and other social science disciplines to political studies in education.

METHODS TO REACH OUR GOALS

Political Systems And Macro Analysis

Gerald Sioufe presented to this group last year a provocative paper on political systems analysis.¹¹ He thinks systems analysis has been used as a window dressing for some studies but has not yet proven rewarding as a method of study. He did concede that the systems model can be used to "suggest the larger canvas, the total picture of which one's study is but a piece". Given this perspective, systems analysis remains one of the few promising methods available to engage in the macro analysis of the educational political system I advocated above. The task is to test the limits of systems analysis for our purposes and refine the concepts. Perhaps the ultimate pay-off will be small but the verdict at this stage is still out. Systems analysis does remind

¹⁰ Martin Landau, "On the Use of Functional Analysis in American Political Science", Social Research, 35 (Spring, 1968).

¹¹ Gerald Sroufe, "Political Systems Analysis in Educational Administration", Can the Emperor Be Clothed, AERA meeting, Los Angeles, Feb., 1969.

us to focus macro-analysis on specific outputs, but it does not delineate for us which is output and which is input.

Macro political analysis has also been impeded by the shortcomings of the survey or other quantitative comparative studies. In these studies a restricted set of variables susceptible to numerical measurement are isolated and accepted as indicators. For instance, per pupil expenditures and voter turnout can be computed in a large number of school districts with varied characteristics. Survey methods permit the use of descriptive and inferential statistics, including cluster analysis.

Survey methods and aggregate comparative studies on the state and local levels indicate that policy outcomes, including education, are more closely associated with social and economic indicators than political variables.¹² Case studies, on the other hand, suggest that political variables are important determinants of educational policy. Case studies can probe decision-making and process variables more deeply but do not allow us to generalize about 50 states or 19,000 local school districts. However, survey variables used as indicators of political processes (or institutions) are often insensitive and inappropriate. Consequently, political variables do not appear to be significant.

Two promising approaches might help these problems. One way to minimize limitations is to combine the two approaches by conducting a series of pilot case studies as a basis for relating variables which may, with greater confidence, be treated by survey techniques. In this regard a description of methods by James et al. of their study of large cities is useful.

"Each of our staff studied one or more of the member school districts of the (Great Cities) Research Council. The staff member became intimately familiar with the legal structure in which the school system was placed; with the historical development with the relationships between the school system and other agencies of government ... and with the complete budget process ...

The 14 cities of the Research Council served as laboratories in which our staff, through extensive observing and interviewing, identified a number of variables ... (that) were included in a questionnaire ... to the remaining 92 cities of the sample."¹⁴

¹² See, for example, Thomas A. Dye, "Government Structure, Urban Environment, and Educational Policy", Midwest Journal of Political Science, 11 (August, 1967), 353-380 and Richard I. Hoffenbert, "The Relation Between Public Policy and Some Structural and Environmental Variables in the American States", American Political Science Review, 60 (March, 1966), pp 73-82.

¹³ See, for instance, Robert Dahl, Who Governs, (New Haven: Yale University, 1961).

¹⁴ See H. Thomas James et al. in Determinants of Educational Expenditures in Large Cities in the United States, (Stanford: School of Education, 1963), pp 40-42.

A recent article in the American Political Science Review emphasizes that economic and social factors may be important determinants of revenue and expenditure policies in education which are very dependent on the economic potential of the state or city. But these same variables may be less important in influencing educational policies which reflect political values of a community (e.g. school board elections, curriculum issues, community control, etc.).¹⁵ In short, the explanatory importance of socio economic and political process variables might vary with the nature of policy being investigated. This implies we should devote more survey efforts to value conflicts and issues that are not primarily fiscal in nature. In short, we must keep experimenting until we can find political variables amenable to statistical analyses that will not mask political interactions. If multiple regression analysis is distorted by multicollineanty we can use factor or cluster techniques for such variables.

OTHER PROMISING METHODS

David Rogers' strategy combines some of the concepts of organizational theory with political behavior.¹⁶ He studied the implementation of specific policies (primarily desegregation) from the school board level down through the successive layers of the hierarchy to the level of the classroom teacher. He employed several modes to document the changes made by personnel in central office subdivisions and field units. The Bailey-Mosher study of the first year of implementation of Title I traced the formulation of specific ambiguous Congressional policy decisions and the subsequent efforts of federal-state-and local administrators to interpret and put them into effect.¹⁷

This approach supports Gergen's concept of stages in policy making.¹⁸ Gergen is concerned with identifying points of leverage e.g.-individuals or institutions with the capacity to effect a substantial influence on the output of the system. Leverage points will vary according to the stage of the policy making process an issue is passing through. Consequently, a single individual will probably not possess a great number of resources at all the following stages: initiation, staffing and planning, communication and publicity, institutional sanctions, intralite coalition and compromise, financing, and implementation-control. Gergen also favors the use of role analysis as

¹⁵ James W. Clarke, "Environment, Process, and Policy: A Reconsideration", American Political Science Review, 63 (Dec., 1969), pp 1172-1181.

¹⁶ Reported in 110 Livingston Street (New York: Random House, 1969).

¹⁷ Stephen K. Bailey and Edith K. Mosher, ESEA: The Office of Education Administers A Law (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968).

¹⁸ Raymond A. Bauer and Kenneth J. Gergen (eds.), The Study of Policy Formation (New York: The Free Press, 1968), pp 182-205.

a possible method for understanding the politics of federal-state-local relationships in education as Neal Gross did for superintendents in Massachusetts.¹⁹ This would build in the type of role analysis Aaron Wildavsky uses in his book Politics of the Budget Process. He analyzed the different roles played by the Budget Bureau, appropriations subcommittees, bureau chiefs, and other actors, in the process.²⁰

CONCLUSION

A paper of this type is inherently a partial treatment and reflects the concerns of the author. I have outlined the complexity of the politics of education and the difficulty of dealing with 19,000 districts and fifty states, each of which is to a degree unique. Perhaps, a useful strategy would involve collaborative projects where several political researchers in different sections of the country use a common agenda, a common system of reporting, and a single research plan. Such a scheme might provide us with reliable findings simultaneously in all sections of the nation. It is exceedingly difficult for the individual researcher working at most with one or two colleagues and a few graduate students, to do a comparative study that includes more than six communities. The research effort to study large number of communities is too great to sustain. To overcome this problem, the National Opinion Research Center has established a data collection apparatus and data archives for conducting comparative community research within a probability sample of 200 American cities. The PCS has these characteristics:

1. In each city a social scientist is employed to collect data about specific types of community decisions. A highly skilled interviewer is also employed.
2. These staff people have enlisted the cooperation of five to ten local citizens who hold positions of prominence to serve as a panel of informants.
3. This organization will be made available to social scientists interested in comparative research in American cities and all studies will be entered in a data bank available for future analysis. Both basic and applied studies in the politics of urban education could be served by PCS.²¹ Users are to be chargeable on a cost reimbursable basis.

Even this kind of massive effort, however, does not solve the problems caused by the rapid changes occurring every year in the politics of education. A snapshot of the political system at any one point in time is likely to be outmoded

¹⁹ Neal Gross et al, Explorations in Role Analysis (New York: John Wiley, 1958).

²⁰ Aaron Wildavsky, The Politics of the Budget Process (Boston: Little Brown, 1957).

²¹ See Peter Rossi and Robert Crain, "The NORC Permanent Community Sample", Public Opinion Quarterly, (Summer, 1968), pp 261-272.

rapidly by teacher and student militancy, community control, new state-wide taxes and other important trends.

The above problem highlights the uncertain role politics of education now plays in the training of future educational administrators. So far we cannot point to our research base as providing very much for improving the "political technology" of school administrators. For instance, this focus would require increased application of voting behavior and public opinion surveys to school tax and bond elections. This would also imply a somewhat different set of priorities and strategies than those presented here.