

**PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH:  
ITS RELEVANCE AND SCOPE**

by

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Abstract

As many of us are probably aware, philosophy as a discipline and the philosophy of education are fields of academic study in decline. It appears that philosophy, at least in the university, has reached the end of a gallows of its own constructing. If philosophy is going to proliferate as a discipline it is going to need to adapt itself to our volatile times and find ways to make itself relevant to a professional research and policy studies climate. Intellectual bridgeheads need to be made in various disciplines to revitalize the philosophy of education and assign it a place of value. This paper will argue that the lack of philosophy in educational policy studies is an intellectual and theoretical weakness. Analytical philosophy can add theoretical depth and richness to policy studies and inquiry, and philosophical approaches can add to the methodological infrastructure of educational policy studies and policy work as a field. The issue of adapting philosophical methods and approaches will be drawn out, explained, and discussed. Education policy is widely regarded as an interdisciplinary field, but it is often only tenuously related to philosophy and does not consider or use philosophical methods in its analysis. There simply is no tradition of philosophical analysis in policy studies. The purpose of applying philosophical methods to an object in educational policy is not for the sake of prediction, control, and input-output ratios, but to add richness to the body of theory, ideas, and concepts that inform policy thinking. Decision makers require a whole range of information. The information needs, particularly in educational policy, are vast and complex. New kinds of analysis serve to renew and improve the theoretical infrastructure of the domain.

*Keywords:* Philosophy, Policy Studies, Education Policy

### Policy Studies

Policy studies is generally considered to be the study of, and inquiry into, a whole range of social and political problems as well as their causes and effects. As a field, it cuts across several disciplines and influences many different aspects of life and society. Policy studies is commonly divided into two branches: i. descriptive, and ii. prescriptive. Descriptive analysis seeks to clarify problems and issues. Prescriptive analysis seeks to make statements about areas where resources ought to be allocated and what the problems are that require our most serious attention. This general differentiation of the field of policy studies holds across its main disciplines of Political Science (foreign policy, defense, electoral matters, legislative reform, and civil liberties), Economics (economic regulation, labour, consumer protection, communications, taxing/spending, and agriculture), Sociology and Psychology (poverty, minorities, crime, education, and population), Urban and Regional Planning (housing, land use, transportation, and environmental protection), and in Science and Engineering (science and technology policy, health, energy, and biomedical policy) (Nagel, 1983). Research into educational policy, however, is a special kind of policy inquiry, and is still a very young and developing field. The distinctness of education policy studies raises questions regarding method and why some approaches are more fruitful and useful than others.

### Education Policy

The domain of educational policy studies does not often include or recognize philosophy. In a field dominated by cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis, and different kinds of

experimental research, philosophical analysis is well outside the mainstream thinking. Common research methods drawn from policy studies include interviews, surveys, case studies, sampling, and experimental design. Analytical philosophy can add to this array of instruments, in terms of both conceptual and linguistic analysis. Research rooted in a philosophical approach will be part of the early, theory-generating stages of the educational policy cycle. It may be able to lend insight that more conventional approaches miss. Adapting analytical philosophy to educational policy studies will broaden the horizon of the field. Generating rich theory adds depth to the policy making process, and analytical methods can be added at nearly any stage. Analytical philosophy facilitates informed decision making in the later stages of policy making as well. There are at least four distinct strengths analytical philosophy can add to educational policy: i. reduces ambiguity and provides clarity and precision in the use of terms and communication of theories, ii. improves the understanding of decision makers, iii. brings out new perspectives and new understandings, and iv. improves the quality of discussion and debate in the research area.

Education policy is itself a sub-discipline of policy studies that is particularly concerned with the politics and values associated with education. Fred S. Coombs (1989) regards this policy branch to be involved in the analysis of phenomena like school budgets, pay and salaries for teachers, human resources, management, contracts, legal issues, tenure, testing, and other educationally related problems. Higher education policy, then, is a development in this area aimed at these phenomena as they apply to colleges, universities, and post-secondary institutions. Philosophical methods seem particularly out of place here, because this domain is dominated by economical thinking and mathematical analysis. Or it is political, aimed at the various external pressures and outside forces that seek to shape education. The purpose of applying philosophical

methods to an object in educational policy is not for the sake of prediction, control, and input-output ratios, but to add richness to the body of theory, ideas, and concepts that inform policy thinking. In our volatile political climate, and with the many serious problems facing colleges and universities in North America, it is more important than ever to make up for the failure of conventional approaches and to provide clarity concerning our thinking and reasoning. Applying philosophical analysis to the objects of educational policy will add to the theoretical infrastructure of the discipline and provide relevance and importance to the field. The overriding purpose is to clarify, elaborate, and explain theories and ideas that are related to the objects of educational policy thinking.

#### Policy Making

**Table: Versions of the Policy Making Cycle<sup>1</sup>**

1. Data	2. Information Development	3. Information Application	4. Planning	5. Policy Decisions
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<sup>1</sup>Both of these charts have been adapted from Peter J. Haas and Fred J. Springer (1998) *Applied Policy Research: Concepts and Cases*. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc. Many analysts have developed different models for the policy making process. In the case of either of these models, as they pertain to the relevance of analytical philosophy to policy studies, the clear application is in the early development and planning stages (ie: Information Development and Planning). Generating rich theory adds to the infrastructure of ideas and considerations in the early stages of the policy making process. It should be noted, though, that analytical philosophy can add depth and clarity at virtually any stage of the policy cycle.

1. Planning	2. Decision and Policy Making	3. Implementation and Maintenance	4. Evaluation
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The policy-making process is a complex web of interconnected decision making. The theory generated through philosophical inquiry adds depth to all the various domains of research and inquiry. Including new methods and approaches broadens the theoretical horizon of the field and adds to the different stages of the decision-making process. A philosophical approach, however, needs to adapt itself to the prevailing paradigm of the domain. Philosophical analysis is rational, but not purely scientific. Reliance on overly esoteric theories and complex mathematical theorems leads to ambiguity and confusion. Analytical analysis is also not program evaluation. It represents a move away from the traditional and conventional approaches while adhering to the general aim of improving theory. Philosophical analysis, as a qualitative approach, is an attempt to get at the reality of a particular policy related object (ie: liberal education), and to deal with it in great depth and detail. It provides rich, contextual theory that conventional methods, like statistical analysis, may miss. In fact, statistical analysis and technical assessment are so shot through with esoteric jargon and abstruse mathematical equations that it is alienating and misleading. Decision makers require a whole range of information that does not necessarily have to be prescriptive and mathematical. The information needs, particularly in educational policy, are vast and complex. New kinds of analysis serve to improve the theoretical infrastructure of the domain.

While historically policy studies is mainly the product of political science and economics and the attempt to understand the reality of phenomena like electoral polls and military spending, the field has advanced and is expanding rapidly. While it is an interdisciplinary field, it is often only tenuously related to philosophy, and it does not often consider or use philosophical methods in its analysis. The absence of philosophical method in education policy is a theoretical and intellectual weakness. What are largely mathematical and economical approaches eclipse what Yehezkel Dror (1989) calls the "softer" (p.7) approaches and methods. We can assume that philosophical analysis and method goes in the category of the "softer" approaches. Analytical philosophy, however, has been a part in the development of educational policy thinking and is useful in lending clarity to the appropriateness of terms and in the making of arguments for justification. Analytical philosophy as an appendage of policy studies is not prescriptive, and does not make statements based on economic metrics about where attention ought to be paid. It is descriptive, and implied in generating the theories and ideas that fuel policy thinking. Philosophical approaches to policy studies may be removed from the practical necessity of budgets and finance, but they cut across the whole array of policy studies fields and add theoretical fruitfulness and clarity. Adding philosophical methods of analysis to the domain of policy studies generates rich theory and cultivates "policy creativity" (Dror, 1989, p. 9), that can enhance the hard quantitative and statistical thinking of technical analysis and assessment. Philosophical approaches to policy analysis generate "meta-policy" (Dror, 1989, p. 10) that improves the policy-making process.

#### Philosophy and Policy

Policy research as a field is often dominated by economical and mathematical thinking. This has come at the expense of both people and the diversity of ideas. Policy research, policy analysis, and policy evaluation are all distinct processes. Policy research is often used as "a catch-all phrase embracing the many information-gathering and processing activities that public agencies engage in to facilitate decision making" (Haas & Springer, 1998, p. 4). A general division is often made between the analysis of information that happens before a project is undertaken, and evaluation after a program has been implemented. Policy analysis is what takes place before and during a project's development, and program evaluation is what takes place after it already has been implemented. This is a helpful distinction, as the application of analytical philosophy to education policy studies is, in my opinion, clearly a part of the early, descriptive analysis phase of the policy making cycle. Philosophical analysis can occur in the early theory generating stage of the policy process. Another useful distinction is analysis *for* policy, and analysis *of* policy. Analysis for policy is considered to be applied research. Analysis of policy is intended only to illuminate different issues of policies and programs:

"Analysis *for* policy is applied policy research; it is intended to be used by decision makers to improve policies and programs. Analysis *of* policy is more concerned with illuminating the cause and effects of policies and programs, without the purpose of directly affecting policy decisions" (Haas & Springer, 1998, p. 5).

Analytical philosophy is suitable to policy analysis, but it must be adapted to fit the domain. Philosophical analysis is theoretical and conceptual rather than statistical or applied.

#### Philosophical Inquiry and Methods

Philosophical inquiry mirrors the processes that most people are already engaged in, in making meaning out of life and trying to understand the world. Doing philosophical analysis means bringing out aspects of the nature of the world of things, through questioning and examining the facts and evidence, and proceeding rationally and methodically. The processes of individual judgment mirror that of the judge and jury deliberating on evidence and coming to reach a verdict in a trial. The methods of philosophical inquiry and analysis are grounded in generating theory and knowledge through reasoning and argument in a similar sense. Marriam B. Sharon and Edwin L. Simpson (2000) point out four components to philosophical approaches: i. epistemology (questions about the nature of knowledge), ii. metaphysics (questions about what is real), iii. axiology (questions about values), iv. logic (questions about rules for procedure and reasoning) (p. 85). To apply these questions to objects of educational policy might raise issues like: What is education? Why is education important? How does education proceed? What ought the goals of education to be? The impetus for these questions are already embedded in education policy studies, and the job of the philosophical analyst is to study and explain them. Philosophical approaches grounded in this view are already part of policy studies as a field.

#### Analytical Philosophy

Analytical philosophy is often used as an umbrella term to cover a range of methods and approaches (Audi, 1999). It is also sometimes associated with linguistics, but this is a misleading characterization. Philosophical method is mainly concerned with concepts and propositions, which certainly are based in language and linguistic analysis, but this does not mark out its entire scope. The objects of educational policy analysis are not purely linguistic, and require special theoretical methods to illuminate them. Analytical philosophy aims to discover *reality*, and uses

a variety of tools for analysis. Positivists sometimes regard analytical philosophy as involved primarily in the interpretation of arguments and propositions in natural and mathematical science. As it relates to educational policy, however, philosophical methods are concerned with the objects and concepts of educational studies. Today, there is no real consensus on, or tradition of, analytical philosophy in education policy studies. If there is any influence, it generally takes the form of appreciation for rigor and clarity in argument. It remains to be proven that philosophical methods can contribute anything to policy analysis and the field of policy studies.

#### Analytical and Normative Philosophy

There are two species in the philosophy of education: the analytical and the normative (Frankena, 1965). The normative philosophy of education makes statements about what education ought to be and theorizes ways to proceed. The normative branch makes statements and produces arguments and justification for what education *ought* to be. Aristotle, Rousseau, and Dewey are all representative of the normative philosophy of education. The analytical philosophy of education consists in the analysis of concepts, statements, and arguments. Analytical philosophy is distinct from the normative because it does not seek to make prescriptive claims for the goals and processes of education. It is a kind of qualitative analysis that seeks to explain the theories and ideas that are already part of any domain. Analytical method often consists in the breaking up of concepts, ideas, theories, and arguments into concept structures and language structures, which are theoretical and seem to imply more than just language. The data for analysis consists in books, journals, reports, essays, periodicals, research studies, theses and dissertations, bibliographies, dictionaries, online databases, indexes, and

encyclopaedias. Summarizing, integrating, and synthesizing data from various sources provides the basis for generating theories and arguments, but this is not the only aim of analytical inquiry.

#### Analytical Philosophy and Linguistic Analysis

Analytical philosophy is normally associated with linguistics and conceptual analysis. Linguistic analysis "uses human language as its database" (Marriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 88). Linguistics is a method that clarifies and defines the meaning of a word or the use of a term. Conceptual analysis clarifies and explains arguments and theories. Both of these realities are always enmeshed in our lived experience through the basic structures of human communication. The analysis of language and the meaning of words, however, seems too narrow to suit the range of possible objects in the educational policy field (ie: the processes of teaching and learning). A philosophical approach to educational policy studies will require blending and synthesizing the methods of both linguistics and conceptual analysis, as a more robust approach to enhancing understanding in this domain. Both linguistic and conceptual analysis mark out the scope of the influence of analytical philosophy in educational policy studies. The processes of thought and synthesis in the domain of philosophical approaches to educational policy studies includes both conceptual and linguistic analysis. Philosophy of this kind, while neither purely linguistic nor purely conceptual, is not like the formalistic methods of the natural sciences either. A more robustly theorized method will be required for philosophy in education policy studies to expand its sphere of influence.

#### Analytical Philosophy and Conceptual Analysis

In Jerrold R. Coombs and Le Roi B. Daniels, (1997) influential essay "Philosophical Inquiry: Conceptual Analysis," the authors provide three different techniques for the application

of analytical philosophy to research and analysis: Conceptual Interpretation (CI), Conception Development (CD), and Conceptual Structure Assessment (CSA). While they develop these techniques for curriculum purposes, they can be adapted to policy studies and to philosophical inquiry into the objects of education. Analytical philosophy in general adds to all fields of inquiry and research, and is implied in the formulating of rules and in the making of arguments. The techniques developed by Coombs and Daniels (1997) can be applied to policy studies:

*Conceptual Interpretation (CI)*: Aims at detailing the meaning of a term in the context of past judgements and social practices.

*Conception Development (CD)*: Develops new understanding by considering the relationship of a term to sets of interrelated concepts.

*Conceptual Structure Assessment (CSA)*: Explains the arguments and theories underlying research and development.

These techniques are names given to processes in which most analysts are already engaged. They are already implied in most theory and research. While they can be differentiated, they should be considered as loose methodological rules rather than a definitive framework. The objects that philosophical methods seek to demonstrate are more complex because they are already implied in the practice of most policy analysis.

As a research method, analytical philosophy develops an understanding of the theories and ideas implied in any judgment or practice. The approach is generally committed to the idea that knowledge is the product of rigorous and rational thinking. Miriam and Simpson (2000) have generated three additional methods of analytical philosophy that can be applied to policy studies, arising out of a generalization of philosophy as a discipline: i. Dialectical (a process of reconciling opposed positions to eliminate contradictions), ii. Logic (tracing knowledge back to its constitutive elements), and iii. Problematic (pragmatically focusing on a specific problem or issue without focusing on its relationship to other related problems) (p. 86). Philosophical research in education policy, then, *includes anything the philosopher may consider to be relevant*. The only real limitation is the imagination of the analyst. As a general rule, philosophical analysis of education policy should strive for a systematic, rigorous, and disciplined approach to knowledge, although no tradition exists to provide a canon of rules to follow.

#### Policy Analysis and Philosophical Methods

According to George J. McCall and George H. Weber (1989), policy studies can be divided into the analysis of *content* and *process*. This leads to four implicit differentiations, "prescriptive/content, descriptive/content, prescriptive/process, and descriptive/process" (p. 202). Policy *processes* are systems of action and deliberation. Policy *content* refers to the ideas, concepts, and objects that make up policy thinking. According to this taxonomy, philosophical methods and analysis are aimed, in my opinion, mainly at descriptive/content analysis. Descriptive/content analysis provides the arguments and explanations implied in different theories and ideas. Through the power of descriptive analysis of implied theories and ideas, there

is a prescriptive component, where a clearly articulated conceptual framework can provide the basis for policy making. Applying philosophical methods to policy studies is intended to systematize and communicate knowledge as clearly and succinctly as possible. The purpose of philosophical analysis is explanatory, but not empirical. It is analytical, but not scientific. Above all, philosophical method in policy analysis is aimed at the formal reality of concepts, and explaining and clarifying theories and arguments, rather than the relationship between causes and effects. Philosophical analysis can lead to prescriptive principles that the restrictive and technical methods of political and economical analysis may miss. The method of the philosopher, I like to say, applies here as it does across all fields and disciplines.

#### Applying Philosophical Analysis

Applying philosophical analysis to policy studies requires a commitment to generating rational criteria according to which the study can proceed. It is misguided to apply the criteria of scientific method to every kind of thinking. Different analysts have unique thought-styles that colour both the choice of issue and the means of proceeding. The procedural criteria that are generated are the product of the interests and values of the inquirer. Philosophical problems are not purely applied, nor are they purely theoretical. The objects of education policy are both abstract ideas, and part of the lived reality we all confront. Conceptual and linguistic techniques borrowed from analytical philosophy produce a rich theoretical landscape. To say the process of philosophical analysis is purely descriptive is misleading, although it is certainly not the conventional quantitative approach associated with policy studies. A philosophical analysis is a highly reasoned one, but not a strictly scientific one. The data of philosophical analysis is, basically, ideas. The ideas serve as the objects of study, through the complex relationship

between thinking and speaking. Quantitative and statistical analysis are simply inadequate to generate the ideas to fuel policy making. Quantitative analysis is often misleading, usually flawed, and sometimes totally worthless for the everyday operations of educational institutions. The technical specialization of statistical analysis is an intellectual weakness, owed to being loaded with the pseudo-intellectual jargon and impenetrable mathematical models of policy wonks. Many of the core concepts of analysis in policy studies, like "regression analysis" (Haas & Springer, 1998, p. 43), are not only irrelevant, they also induce more confusion and error than sound planning. Decision makers require more than economical evaluation and cost-benefit analysis for their deliberations.

In the often esoteric and technical jargon of mainstream policy studies, philosophical analysis fits in as a "formative" (Haas & Springer, 1998, p. 93) theoretical tool, meaning that it is intended to improve and refine already existing ideas. There is a need for alternatives to the widely accepted and more mainstream approaches. Educational policy studies is still a young and growing field. It should be noted that the outcome of both quantitative and qualitative methods is the same - *policy knowledge*. Philosophical approaches produce meta-policy, made up of the ideas and theories that are vital to the development of knowledge. It has a special significance for education as a field, and to the whole array of human interests and experience. The information needs of educational policy are highly complex and will require innovations to establish theoretical bridgeheads, and to influence what is a highly fragmented field. Philosophical analysis offers an alternative qualitative approach to the sturdy hips of the case study method.

#### Framing Philosophical Inquiry

Before engaging in philosophical inquiry in policy studies, it is important to provide a rationale for the study and why some issues are chosen to be analyzed over others. Here is a sample of initial questions to aid in framing philosophical projects in policy studies:

1. Who will use the information?

Philosophical analysis of objects in educational policy aims at a rich understanding that is helpful for policy making at virtually all levels and stages of the deliberation and decision-making processes. The knowledge produced by a philosophical analysis is intended for use by anyone involved in education policy planning.

2. What kind of information is needed?

All kinds of data can be considered in a philosophical paradigm. Whatever is thought to be of relevance by the analyst can be included. Using a wide array of sources and including many considerations adds to the depth and complexity of the analysis. A considerable breadth and depth of information improves the theoretical infrastructure of the policy object. Books and journals are considered the data, and an intellectual synthesis combined with clear, rigorous argument is the goal. Any ideas and theories that are seen to be relevant can add to the theoretical landscape of the analysis.

3. What is the purpose of the research?

Education today is facing profound difficulties, and the university in particular is facing a general crisis. There is a real need to generate the ideas and theories that can lead us into the

uncertain future. Currently, education faces many serious issues. The purpose of research based in philosophical methods will be to inquire into the ideas and values that influenced the development of our educational institutions aimed at providing a rich theory that can inform the infrastructure of educational policy.

#### 4. When is the information needed?

We should not underestimate the many dire challenges that confront us today. The university finds itself at a crossroads and its future will depend on being driven by well-thought and articulated intellectual and moral ideals. Devising solutions for the parade of issues that are shaping education in North America is a very important goal. The conventional approaches and commonly accepted wisdom have failed, and solutions cannot be found any sooner.

Philosophical policy projects in education will be instrumental in developing a sound theoretical compartment to combat our many problems.

#### 5. What resources are required to conduct the research?

The great strength of philosophical analysis is that it is resource-minimal. It only requires that the analyst have access to a wide and diverse enough body of literature to apply interpretation and draw out theories and ideas. The data consists in books, reports, encyclopaedias, essays, and research projects. With these resources, the analyst should be able to apply philosophical analysis to generate arguments and theories. The resource-minimal nature of philosophy is an interesting issue. As the mother discipline, philosophy thrives on debate,

discussion, controversy, and argument. In a philosophical paradigm, the idea itself is considered the data, and good thinking the method of procedure.

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