



## From objects to subjects: Repositioning teachers as policy actors doing policy work

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### H I G H L I G H T S

- Focus group interviews with teachers in urban schools.
- Goal to introduce teachers' perspectives into policy debate over school reform.
- Data analyzed with tools from qualitative content analysis.
- Two broad policy problems were identified.
- Four policy solutions identified.

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### A B S T R A C T

Within policy discourses, teachers are positioned as objects of reform who enact policies under rational systems of observation and accountability and are, therefore, situated as de-professionalized actors lacking expert knowledge. This research project asks relatively straight-forward questions: If practicing teachers were given a voice in political debates over urban education policy and reform, what would they say? What macro-level policy problems would they identify as being important? Findings indicate the primary policy problems include *Systemic Inequity* and *Bad Policy*. The primary policy solutions include, *Schools as a Community Resource*; *Shared Decision-Making*; *Contextual Goals*; and *Time, Space and Resources*.

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Over the past forty years, education policy has become an increasingly global affair (Grek, 2009; Samoff, 2012; Spring, 2008). Global networks made up of policy-actors from government, business, entrepreneurial philanthropic organizations, think tanks, and policy institutes work within, outside, and across traditional political structures to articulate both the content and pace of educational change (Ball, 2012, 2011, 2009, 2008; Lingard & Sellar, 2013). The result has been the rapid proliferation of policy-actors in the field of education across the globe that is organized around a

relatively coherent neoliberal policy regime.

In the United States, a new political landscape has emerged around a relatively uniform set of policies promoting standards, testing and external accountability and the privatization of state services (Apple, 2013; Debray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Debray-Pelot, 2006). These policies have been promoted with funding from private monies and are transforming public education within a neoliberal paradigm (Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Haas, 2007; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; McDonald, 2013; Saltman, 2014, 2009; Scott, 2013, 2009; Reckhow, 2013; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). In the U.S., urban schools in particular, consisting mostly of students living in poverty and students of color, are labeled as “problems” associated with low achievement, truancy, poor quality teachers, and unmotivated parents (Milner, 2012). In this period of

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significant educational reform, these policy shifts have been accompanied by the increasing marginalization of practicing teachers from political debate, particularly when it comes to issues facing urban schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In this debate, teachers are increasingly positioned at the bottom of the policy hierarchy (Ryan & Bourke, 2013) as the end point of a political agenda that is informed by the managerial logic of neoliberalism (Apple, 2004). Within policy discourses and popular media, teachers are represented through a pathologizing discourse of deficits, resistance to change, and an overall lack of authority to act in the public sphere (Cohen, 2010; Shine & O'Donoghue, 2013; Ulmer, 2016). The inter-discursivity of policy and popular media representations of teachers works to “establish a perceived consensus on teachers as lacking both professional competence and the skill to raise professional standards” (Thomas, 2011, p. 379) and to situate teachers “as powerless agents subject to the will of policy-makers” (Anderson, Aronson, Ellison, & Fairchild-Keyes, 2015, p. 359). It is this marginalization that informs the research project detailed here.

This article presents findings from a series of focus group interviews with practicing teachers working in urban schools in the Midwestern, Northeastern, and Southeastern United States. The focus on urban schools reflects their centrality in political and popular educational discourses and their position as the central target of reform efforts in the U.S. With a clear understanding that “giving voice” to the marginalized is by no means a straightforward or unproblematic task (McDonald, 1986), this study employs focus group interviews to provide practicing teachers with secure spaces for professional collaboration and exchange to define policy problems and propose policy solutions that can contribute to larger public debates over schooling and education policy.

In the following section, we begin with a review of relevant literature to situate this study within recent innovations in education policy sociology. We then describe our methods, which included focus group interviews that were analyzed using tools from qualitative content analysis, after which we detail the policy problems that our participants identified and their accompanying solutions. These findings include discussions of specific policy problems, which we label: 1) *systemic inequity* and 2) *bad policy*; and policy solutions, which we label: 1) *shared decision-making*; 2) *contextual goals*; 3) *time, space and resources*; and 4) *schools as a community resource*. To conclude, we outline our discussion of these findings, paying careful attention to address our goal of expanding the education policy conversation to include those perspectives that, we believe, should contribute to the policies that most directly inform teaching practice.

## 1. Review of relevant literature

The public policy-making process in the U.S. involves five distinct, but inter-related phases (Dunn, 1994). Policy-makers begin with problem definition and the setting of an agenda, which is followed by the formulation and legitimation of policy solutions that are designed to resolve the policy problems identified in the agenda-setting phase. Policy solutions are then adopted by an institution with legal authority, implemented by policy-actors working at various levels of governance, and evaluated using metrics established in the policy solution phase.

Each phase of the process is inter-related and inter-dependent, but there is also a clear organizational hierarchy at work in policy-making. One phase drives the policy-making process: problem definition (agenda setting). Problem definition narrows the focus of public debate and policy discourse to specific sets of phenomena, processes, and activities, while it brackets out other phenomena, processes, and activities as being irrelevant. This not

only establishes salience, but also the scope of possible policy solutions and the means by which their efficacy is to be evaluated. Thus, problem definition is the central component of the process, and this has important implications for understanding the power dynamics of public policy. “[T]he group that successfully describes a problem will also be the one that defines the solutions to it, thereby prevailing in policy debate” (Birkland, 2007, p. 63), which is a reality that has clear implications for contemporary trends in education policy and reform.

One of the most significant trends in education policy in recent decades has been the emergence of what Stephen Ball (2012, 2011, 2009, 2008) has termed global policy networks (Apple, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2013). This new mode of network governance is made up of dynamic, shifting policy networks that can be understood as policy communities “based upon shared conceptions of social problems and their solutions” that are informed by a neoliberal shift toward economization and governmentality (Ball, 2012, pp. 3–6). In the United States, the emergence of network governance has transformed the landscape of education policy and focused national attention on urban schools as sites in need of reform (Debray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Debray-Pelot, 2006). American public education is a federal system that has, for most of its history, been characterized by distributed power and the privileging of local community control. However, in recent decades, the locus of control has increasingly shifted toward network actors influencing federal and state policy and away from local school districts. Complex networks made up of elite philanthropies (Kovacs, 2010; Reckhow, 2013; Saltman, 2010, 2009; Tompkins-Stange, 2016) and corporately and philanthropically funded policy organizations (Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Haas, 2007; Kretchmar et al., 2014; McDonald, 2013) have advanced a neoliberal policy agenda of standards, testing, accountability, and privatization (Apple, 2013) specifically focused on urban school districts using the normative justification of empowering working-class communities of color (Saltman, 2014; Scott, 2013, 2009).

Recent literature building on Ball's policy sociology draws on Bourdieu's field theory to conceptualize education policy as global and national policy fields characterized by complex cross-field effects (Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008). Bourdieu (1993) describes a social field as a structured space of unequal power relations and domination populated by agents inhabiting positions of relative advantage or disadvantage and possessing varying amounts and forms of capital who confront one another in a struggle over the preservation or transformation of the doxa regulating the field.

*The strategies of agents depend on their position in the field, that is, in the distribution of the specific capital, and on the perception that they have of the field depending on the point of view they take on the field as a view taken from a point in the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101, emphasis in original).*

Thus, an education policy field can be conceptualized as a structured space of elite network-actors from government, business, entrepreneurial philanthropy, think tanks, and policy institutes inhabiting a position of relative advantage in relation to non-elite policy actors, such as families, students and teachers, who perform and negotiate policy discourses in the struggle over the production and actualization of education policy.

In this study, we conceptualize the contemporary policy landscape of the US as a national policy field dominated by elite network-actors propagating neoliberal policy discourses that work to situate non-elite actors (teachers) as policy problems to be managed, surveilled, measured, and responsibilized (Apple, 2004; Clarke, 2004). The task for this project is to begin to ‘flip the script’

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