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Education, Policy and Urban Poverty: The Lessons Learned from a Comparative Analysis of American and English Teachers' Views on Educational Policy Initiatives

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Background

Research Objectives

This paper scrutinizes the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes in both England and the United States with particular emphasis on the ameliorative effects of educational policy in poor communities. Poverty appeared as a social problem in the late nineteenth century as industrialization expanded, and despite interventions in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, poverty did not disappear. In the same vein, there has been consistent interest in education and educational outcomes throughout the last century. While the foundations of the present systems are rooted in the ideals of Horace Mann and the Education Act 1870, the emergence of the English comprehensive school movement and US civil rights legislation were conscious policy endeavours to increase equality of opportunity for lower socio-economic groups and racial minorities in the twentieth century. It was hoped that by improving educational opportunity, systemic poverty would decline.

Research Questions

The research pivots around three central research questions:

In the post-World War II period, defined for this study as 1964 through 2000, what were the major trends and policy initiatives implemented in the education systems of England and the United States that targeted the amelioration of poverty in urban communities?

Within this time frame, how would education practitioners who taught in the neighbourhood schools, secondary schools, evaluate programs and initiatives particularly in terms of their potential to reform education and to break the cycle of poverty in which many of their students lived?

Which of these programs or initiatives that were devised and instituted in each nation were seen as a successful method of ameliorating poverty by three constituencies: policy-makers, the educationists and the policy analysts? Do all three constituencies agree upon the level of success or are there disagreements between them? What impact is this level of agreement or disagreement likely to have upon future policy initiatives that seek to ameliorate poverty through education?

Methods

Research Methodology

Two key premises support the structural framework of the research proposal: the study is historical in orientation as well as comparative by design. While it is tempting to employ historical narrative, Phillips, citing Farrell, advises that periodisation is appropriate if there is a core sense of unity that binds all of the elements of the time period together in specific ways that allows for description and analysis. Thus, the comparison in this paper centers on the shift in education policy through three distinct eras: immediate post-war, social democratic and market.

Using the three eras as a central framework, the qualitative research project is set in two communities, one in each nation. Situated in urban areas, the communities and schools were chosen for their economic instability, their above average levels of poverty and educational

underachievement. Teachers, who participated in oral history interviews, were either from the locality or had a long tenure within each school and so could speak to community attitudes toward education, education policy in a local context and their analysis of education success, a definition that often differed from official definitions.

Frame

Analytical Frameworks

Quentin Skinner's approach to documentary analysis written particularly for the purpose of research in the history of ideas provides a strong method of scrutiny and one that the researcher adopted for this project although in a somewhat modified form. The method, divided into five constituent parts, combines elements of both content analysis and critical analysis to probe documentary evidence.

The difficulty of Skinner's analytical rubric is that it originally was designed for studying the history of political thought and not necessarily education or the policy making process.   However, it is possible to adapt such a rubric for this research proposal with some modifications. Skinner's key components - the comprehension of locutionary meaning, language conventions in light of locutionary meaning, authorial intent and contextual analysis - lead to a comprehensive picture of a series of documents produced by and for education.

Politics and history are two distinctly different fields of study, and while they may share common themes, they do not easily share modes of analysis. The documents that are created as an output of the political process can be scrutinized using Skinner's framework but the process which created the documents cannot be investigated by this method making it necessary to adopt another analytical approach. If politics was an essentially static realm that investigated the policy-making decisions of government, then perhaps the Skinnerian analytical approach would suffice. The Skinnerian approach, which endeavours to uncover language conventions and authorial intent within a historical framework, could provide a foundation for analysis if politics and policy-making were immobile activities that did not respond to external stimuli. However, politics is inherently dynamic because democratic and representative governments like the UK and the US depend upon differing constituent groups for political power. As the axiom suggests, politics does not happen in a vacuum but it influenced by competing groups with particular agendas as well as by events external to society. Politicians must respond to these agendas, work within established organizational and political structures and understand socio-political events while also advancing their own political causes, in order to retain power. Skinner's model does not speak to this process and so becomes a limited analytical tool. Yet, Easton's systems analysis proposes a method of analysis for politics, one rooted in behaviouralism and specifically targeting the social sciences. Easton's approach offers a holistic approach to policy-making utilizing the social environment, the philosophical underpinnings of policy and the organizational structures which negotiate policy implementation. The fluidity of this system is a useful starting point for the structural analysis appropriate to the needs of the study.

Research findings

Research Conclusions

After World War II, the change in social, economic and political circumstances in both England and the US necessitated a reconsideration of educational priorities focusing primarily upon secondary education and the expansion of educational opportunity. The research points to an accord on the 'big' issues that policy addressed in the post-war era. The big issues centre upon socio-educational goals and reflect those problems that societies believed would need to be attended to in order to maintain or advance their place within the global community.

While agreement on the 'big' issues is evident, there is disagreement on policy implementation and definitions of success. Both nations began to consider equality of educational opportunity yet devising schemes to effectively move the philosophical goal of equality into an already developed education system proved daunting. In terms of success, there is considerable divergence. The transition from the social democracy era to the market model suggests that there was disagreement over the goals of

education and its ability to meet national needs. Policy-makers, on a macro level, were willing to gamble with new policies to effect educational change. However, on the micro level, the teachers viewed this business driven policy rather differently. Most agreed that there was a need for standards in education but diverged on the appropriateness of academic standards for communities that did not have a tradition of higher education.

Importance of the study

Education policy in the latter half of the twentieth century demonstrated a clear trajectory towards increasing nationalization thereby disavowing the rich educational histories of both nations. While both nations have unique policy-making structures and education systems, the elemental feature of both was the reliance upon the locality in education policy. While it would be facile to suggest a return to the historical norm solely for the sake of reverting to the rich historical past, policy-makers must comprehend the consequences of policy changes on this particular scale.

The ascendancy of a national education agenda impacts upon the transformative power of education as a tool to ameliorate systemic poverty. The era of social democracy consistently linked education and poverty, highlighting the capacity of education to reduce the persistence of poverty particularly through increased national funding. However, an increased national role within education limits the role of the locality within the policy-making and implementation process. This, in turn, affects the community's ability to engage with itself to determine what it is needed for **that** particular community. This is contrary to Habermasian critical theory in its support for engagement and dialogue in order to transform communities and to move them out of poverty.

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