Research in Review

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Federal Politics and Education: Complexity and Inconsistency

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The relationship between politics and education is complex. The interaction between these spheres occurs in both directions, as schooling affects political behavior, as well as the reverse (see, for example, Coleman, 1965; Easton and Dennis, 1965; Jennings and Niemi, 1968; Hess and Torney, 1967). Any relatively exhaustive study of the relationship between politics and education necessarily addresses several levels, as local, state, and national politics all affect policies and practices in elementary and secondary schools, as well as institutions of higher learning.

Furthermore, studies of politics and education encompass a broad and disparate array of areas of inquiry such as legislative politics, power relations in local communities, interest-group behavior, and judicial decisions, to name but a few. Finally, and perhaps most discouragingly, the complexity of the field is increased, as Peterson (1974) infers, by the fact that there are, as yet, no completely satisfactory explanatory models that have emerged from the literature on the exchanges between educational and political systems. Those exchanges apparently do not operate in a consistently rule-like fashion, and predictions from past research are tenuous at best.

Because of the complexity of the field, because operational paradigms in the politics-of-education literature have not yet been fully developed, and because space for the present review is limited, the scope of this review must also be limited. The primary focus of the literature reviewed here is that of the politics of school finance, especially that of federal aid to education. This focus addresses a more general interest than would be possible in a review of literature on state and local politics, while allowing an overview of both direct and indirect federal influence in education and of the influence of interest groups and individuals in obtaining funding and setting educational policy.

Politics and Finance: Federal Aid

The body of literature on federal politics and federal aid is the most voluminous and one of the most qualitative in the educational politics field. In his comprehensive review of politics and education, Peterson (1974) suggests that this is so primarily because "national educational politics is 'political.'" That is, the study of national educational politics allows the use of standard political science categories such as groups, political parties, public opinion, and executive-legislative relationships. Data at this level are readily available from sources such as the Gallup poll, congressional roll calls and committee hearings, and published reports of funding allocations.

The standard works in the study of federal politics and finance generally utilize the methodology of case studies and the interpretive framework of group theory to organize the large amount of data resulting from case studies. Group theory focuses on the changing coalitions among interest groups in competition for influence in Congress—downplaying the effects of partisan politics, social conflicts, and public opinion—and it stresses the nonrational nature of the processes that constitute policy making. Explanations derived from the group-theory approach tend to be "common sense," in Peterson's terminology, and are often expressed in natural language statements.

Munger and Fenno's (1962) analysis of national politics and education is recognized as the classic study in the field and serves as an exemplar of the group-theory approach. Their book asserted that, even though widespread support for

federal aid to education existed for decades, no aid legislation was passed because the sentiment was not sufficiently intense, and political leaders would not be punished for their failure to act. The political problem, in other words, was one of building a strong consensus in favor of federal aid. Such a consensus was difficult to build and sustain because of deep cleavages between groups: a conservative coalition against the NEA and AFL-CIO, Southerners against civil rights groups, and parochial school groups against public-school groups. Because of this opposition among interest groups, Munger and Fenno joined others (Price, 1962; Bendiner, 1965) in predicting a dim future for federal aid to education.

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This prediction quickly proved to be erroneous, however, with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. The passage of ESEA points out the limitations of group-theory interpretations of political activity. Interest-group activity was essentially circumvented by the Johnson Administration's power in Congress and by the essentially secret writing of the legislation by a small staff of administration officials. Moreover, the passage of ESEA did not result from normal political activity such as public opinion or pressure from educational organizations, but from the "political atmosphere" of mid-60's Washington and the social policy of the Kennedy-Johnson Administrations (Murphy, 1971; Hughes and Hughes, 1972). Despite the apparent inadequacies of the group-theory approach in explaining the ESEA legislation, subsequent policy-making studies merely updated the Munger and Fenno analysis, rather than substantially revising it. Meranto (1967), for example, stressed the development of a new coalition of interest groups in 1965 as a major explanatory factor in the passage of ESEA, while Eidenberg and Morey (1969) attributed causality to "stable relationships" among groups and individuals with a strong interest in the issue.

Perhaps one of the greatest additions to perspective on federal aid is that provided by Lowi (1964), who departed from group-theory explanations to talk about the politics associated with "redistributive" issues. These issues tend to arouse political processes characterized by partisanship, centralization and executive domination, and relative immunity to group pressures (see also Greenstone and Peterson, 1973). In this context, interest-group functions become less important than the power balance between liberal and conservative forces in the legislative and executive branches, and educational politics becomes inseparable from the political processes associated with larger social issues. Again, though, despite the general level of excellence evident in the analyses of federal aid, Peterson's (1974) conclusion that they do not adequately account for the singular importance of the passage of ESEA seems appropriate.

Indirect Intervention

While federal aid represents the most direct intervention into educational policy and practice, it is not the only mode of federal influence. Intervention also occurs through indirect avenues including practices resulting from court decisions, a topic not covered here because of its extensiveness. Instead, three more subtle, but still powerful, categories of federal influence will serve as illustrations.

The first of these categories is that of accreditation. As Dickey and Miller (1972) indicate, the traditional concept of voluntary, nongovernmental accreditation of schools and systems and the roles of accrediting agencies have been significantly altered by federal involvement in the recent past. Prior to 1968, the federal government paid little attention to the operation of accrediting agencies except to utilize their information for governmental purposes such as determining eligibility for distribution of federal funds. But beginning in 1968, with the establishment of the Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility Staff at the U.S. Office of Education (USOE), and continuing at least through 1971, a series of actions by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) and USOE expanded geometrically the federal influence in accreditation. This increase in federal influence and control has, in

the terminology of Dickey and Miller, caused a "dilemma" of autonomy and control in the functioning of accreditation agencies and their influence on school policies and practices.

Federal influence on school policies and practices is also felt through policy statements from USOE and information on program constraints arising from controversies such as that over *Man: A Course of Study*, a project funded by the National Science Foundation (see: Merrow, 1974; Holden, 1975; Saunders, 1975; Walsh, 1975; Dow, 1975; Weber, 1975). One of the more apparent problems related to this federal influence is the inconsistency of information produced by these sources and the internal conflicts within it. As Merrow (1974) suggested, one of the functions of information and policy statements emanating from USOE in the recent past has been that of moderating many apparently conflicting statements resulting from partisan clashes between a Congress controlled by one political party and a White House run by the other. Policy information on program constraints is also stamped with the inconsistency characteristic of politics.

The recent controversy over *Man: A Course of Study* (*MACOS*) resulted in legislation making Congress a huge program-research review board. But the review power is apparently to be exercised differentially, with the controversial aspects of the *MACOS* project to receive closer scrutiny than the controversial aspects of the *Biological Sciences Curriculum Study* project (*BSCS*), also funded by the National Science Foundation (Walsh, 1975).

Political Inputs: Individual and Group Influence

The inconsistency and internal conflict apparent in political "outputs"—policy statements, funding allocations, and the like—are related, perhaps causally, to the nature of the "inputs" into the processes of educational politics—the fractionated effects of the broad array of individuals and groups exerting varying degrees of influence on legislation and policy development.

A reiteration of two points provides a summary perspective on attempts to analyze the relative influences of individuals and groups on federal educational politics. One point is that the wealth of studies has failed to demonstrate any precise relationship between policy outputs and political structures and processes. The other is that conclusions from these studies tend to be couched in natural language, common-sense terms, as with the "critical" generalization advanced by Bailey, Frost, Marsh, and Wood (1962) that interest groups sometimes work at cross purposes.

The fragmentation of influence exerted by interest groups is, of course, related to the absolute number of pressure groups and their characteristic isolation, decentralization, and lack of coordination (Murray, 1976). These characteristics, in turn, appear to have resulted from two major influences on the development of these groups—namely, the fact that pressure groups typically organize to serve the interests of specific constituencies and the fact that federal control is fractionated along program lines, with USOE sharing administrative responsibilities with other agencies such as the Department of Labor and the National Institute of Education (Shalala and Kelly, 1973; Murray, 1976).

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The influence of individuals on the processes of educational politics is clearly even more diffuse than that of groups, again because of the larger numbers involved. But two individuals, James Coleman and Daniel P. Moynihan, are among the most influential in terms of recent program and policy formulations, and the nature of their influence again underscores the point that educational politics tends to be part and parcel of the politics of a broader social policy (Grant, 1973; Holden, 1975).

Conclusions and Omissions

This review has omitted some sources that are significant to a more thorough understanding of the field of educational politics. Two of the more outstanding of these omissions are: (a) the whole body of literature on the educational policy

and practice implications of judicial decisions and (b) Iannacone's (1967) study of politics in education.

The review has also strongly suggested that the field is marked by complexity and some contradiction due to the lack of highly satisfactory explanatory models emerging from the literature, a result of the signal ecology of political and educational systems. Perhaps, as Peterson (1974) has suggested, future studies that isolate the impact of political variables by controlling for environmental factors will add greater explanatory power to the educational politics literature. EL

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