

# Chapter 1

## Introduction to Policy and Inequality in Education

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**Abstract** This chapter provides a brief introduction to *Policy and Inequality in Education*: an edited collection authored by members of the editorial panel of the new book series: *Education Policy and Social Inequality*. The chapter sets the scene for both the book and the series. It draws particular attention to the book's different international and empirical foci and suggests that in many cases, where the study of social inequality is the focus, education policy is often held in abeyance, and vice versa. The chapter also draws attention to the ways in which inequality can be reproduced both in educational settings and through education policy and practice.

This collection introduces the Springer book series *Education Policy and Social Inequality*. The chapters canvass, though not exhaust, possible themes to be taken up in the series and advance the series' broader agenda to provoke generative ways of thinking about, and acting on, relations between education policy and social inequality (albeit the series is not constrained by the issues raised in this book).

While education policy has often been understood as having a normative function and a necessary part of delivering solutions to social inequality, the series is interested in how education policy frames, creates and, at times, exacerbates social inequality. The series adopts a critical orientation, encompassing: (1) innovative and interdisciplinary theoretical and conceptual studies—including but not exclusively drawing on sociology, cultural studies, social and cultural geography, history; and, (2) original empirical work that examines a range of educational contexts, including early years education, vocational and further education, informal education, K-12 schooling and higher education.

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As editors of the series, we see critique and policy studies as having a possible transformative function. We are interested in approaches that seek to re-articulate policy discourses, the realm of research, or which posit: (1) new dimensions to understanding the role of education policy in connection with enduring social problems; and, (2) the amelioration of social inequality in ways that challenge the possibility of equity in the liberal democratic state, as well as in other forms of governance and government.

The chapters in this particular book, the first in the series, take a varied approach to policy and policy studies, which reflect continuing concerns with the role of the state, and with the micropolitics of practice (e.g. Simons et al. 2009). The chapters also cover a variety of conceptual frameworks, theoretical tools, and empirical contexts.

Some take to task the acts of policy and the micropolitics around the production and enactment of policy. Braun focuses on a performative education policy and its effects on teachers, while attempting to reinvigorate ‘voice’ based policy work and new forms of relationality as social justice work. Fataar and Feldmann focus on professional learning communities in South African schooling and the link to a national policy, explored through a focus on one teacher. In a similar way to Braun, there is an emphasis here on the ways the national policy becomes reinterpreted, and through concepts from Bourdieu such as ‘learning through the body’, provides certain types of available action in schools.

Some chapters are interested in the limits of policy. If we were to take an approach to policy studies that paralleled science studies (e.g. Latour 1999), we might see that some authors in the collection aim to break open the black box of policy—to put ‘reality’ back into policy. Thus, Pillow uses Afrofuturism theorizing to examine how data matters in policy formation, and why reimagining data can mean different types of policy possibilities and futures. Gulson and Webb look at the connections between postgenomics and education policy, with a focus on authority, epistemology and policy knowledge. Their chapter examines what policy analysis means when the subjects and objects of policy are part of new biological rationalities, informed by epigenetics and neuroscience.

Other chapters explore how education policy is informed by different types of knowledge, impacted by particular absences, or changed through modifying previously held premises. Leonardo and Singh introduce the work of Franz Fanon to highlight how education and education policy lacks substantive and sustained engagement with colonialism and violence. Leonardo and Singh posit that a ‘de-colonial education’ and ‘new humanism’ could inform, and transform, policy. Lubienski identifies the ways the premise of equality in education has been transformed from one focused on access and opportunity, to one in which equality is about the right to choose a quality school. Lubienski argues that this shift is the outcome of incentive or market based policies that have shifted conceptions of equality, to the extent that choice is framed as a new civil rights movement.

What many of the chapters highlight is that while there are global interconnections of both policy making and responses, the nation-state continues to matter in education policy. In this vein, Alexadiou highlights the role of public policy, and the extent to which education policy acts in a complementary way to national agenda setting policies, specifically the ‘social right of equality’. What is notable

about this chapter is its connection to law, something that is often inferred in discussions of education policy but not often explicated. Van Zanten looks at policies concerning widening participation in higher education in France and the effect on different types of institutions, including elite universities. The chapter emphasises how these policies can change relations between institutions and reorient where justice in higher education is done.

Two of the chapters attempt to reconceptualise the role of policy and justice. Gale, Molla and Parker focus on recent popular work by Thomas Piketty and Danny Dorling, and education policy's possible role in ameliorating disadvantage, especially in higher education. This chapter adds to debates about distributive justice by contributing new conceptions of recognition around epistemology and agency. Olssen takes to task critiques of neoliberalism, and attempts to engage with the often politically fraught question of the extent to which neoliberal orthodoxies are compatible with policies promoting equity and social justice. The chapter argues that neoliberalism is unlikely to survive, and as such what sort of policy settlement will follow, what sort of social justice might this be, and what policy arenas will be impacted.

Authors in the book also canvass a variety of ways in which social inequality is enacted both *in* (i.e. within) and *through* (i.e. reproduction; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) education systems and structures (Gale and Molla 2015). Just as social justice can be enhanced via: (1) the benefits wrought through participation in quality education; and, (2) the just treatment of students within classrooms, so too can these be avenues for re/producing inequality and social *in*justice.

In this sense, social inequality is thought to operate *within* education in the ways that staff, students, teachers, academics, and so on, are treated within their institutions by their employers, managers, colleagues, etc. This can include overt/covert behaviour, but also in the form of institutional cultures as well as pedagogy and curriculum. Social inequality enacted *through* education speaks to the ways in which education systems re/produce advantage and disadvantage. This may take the form of stratified access to education (Gale et al.; van Zanten), political and rhetorical discourses of free 'choice' in education (Lubienski), historical racial prejudices that exclude certain groups and which position them as inferior and less able (Leonardo and Singh; Alexiadou).

Braun in her chapter illustrates the stark realities facing UK teachers in stridently managerial regimes in academy schools. Excessively high workloads, forced compliance with the school's values, and being required to act in ways at odds with their ethical impulses, are some of the ways in which these teachers are arguably denied social justice in their workplace, with the implication being that this adversely affects the pupils in their care. Similarly, Olssen's depiction of the neoliberal university illustrates how institutional practices can threaten social equity agendas.

Fataar and Feldman's account of Johan—a South African school teacher whose relatively privileged background put him at odds with values and lifeworlds of his students—provides another example of how inequality can be either reproduced or ameliorated by the practice *in* education. For Johan, extensive engagement in a professional learning community enabled him to change his teaching practices and

ultimately transform his pedagogical habitus such that he was more disposed to teaching in socially just ways (cf. Mills 2013).

Pillow's intriguing chapter reveals how policy and policy actors can unwittingly marginalise the people they are ostensibly seeking to help: Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY). Pillow argues that a priori assumptions by policy actors about what counts as 'data' that informs policy, leads to deficit discourses about EPY that ignore their own voices and experiences and does little to ameliorate their disadvantage. In this way, social inequality is reproduced *through* policy, but also *within* the policy process.

The more overt ways in which education can maintain social inequality are addressed in Gale et al.'s chapter, which outlines the nefarious effects of dominant and at times common sense discourses of meritocracy and elitism. The prevalence of such values in modern western nations, the chapter argues, has essentially kept people from lower socioeconomic orders 'in their place' using academic achievement and merit as justification. This has ensured that social mobility through education has been minimised. Lubienski similarly illustrates how access to schooling can be mitigated through appeals to 'choice', which effectively ignores the socioeconomic contexts in which parents are or are not able to choose which schools to send their children.

Gulson and Webb's chapter explores the scenario wherein new developments in life sciences become new authorities that inform policy making in the "postgenomic age". Such biological rationalities, the authors argue, have the potential to reduce socio-cultural effects such as scholastic achievement, and group identity to biological/genetic categories that re/produce social dis/advantage.

The collection, then, begins with broad accounts of social inequality and policy and their intersection from Gale, Molla and Parker, then Gulson and Webb. Olssen's chapter continues with a wider, general discussion of the effects of neoliberalism but introduces higher education in the UK as an empirical case exemplar. The focus on higher education is extended with Van Zanten's analysis of widening participation policies among elite French universities. Race and ethnicity are addressed in the following three chapters, with Leonardo and Singh's exploration of coloniality in education, Alexiadou's discussion of Roma children in Europe, and Pillow's treatment of the experiences of school-aged black parents in the United States. The final three chapters focus more directly on schooling, as Lubienski dissects the representation of school 'choice', while Braun, and Fataar and Feldman explore issues of teachers' work in starkly different contexts (academy schools in London, and South Africa). The contrast between the last two chapters illustrates how different contextual influences can shape teachers' agency and their capacities to address the needs of their students.

Inevitably, some chapters appear more explicit about their focus on either policy or inequalities. Indeed, in making the connection between policy and social inequality, problematising one can often mean holding the other as stable. These remain in tension in the collection across the chapters, but we hope will provide some provocations for thinking about what is required both conceptually and in practice to connect addressing social inequality and education policy, something that we hope may come to characterise this series.

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