

Analytic and Integrative Essay

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As I reflect upon the last three years of doctoral study I focus on the original motivation for wanting to pursue a doctorate in education policy. The original motivation was to conduct research that will encourage policy makers to create policy that will help children with disabilities. Though the current motivation for obtaining a doctorate is similar, the research I wish to conduct has become broader as I now understand that special education exists within the broader context of general education. Additional research interests have captured my attention as I have taken courses.

I remember the first night of Ways of Knowing where Dr. White asked how we know things. I blurted out immediately that the only way to know something was to demonstrate it empirically. Over the last three years, I have learned among many other things why that response is inaccurate. My journey through the doctoral program has broadened my mind and completely changed the way I view the world and interact with information. This essay will be a synthesis and analysis of my journey through the doctoral program.

Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework for learning is a symphony. Composers write music for symphonies to play to an audience. The symphony is composed of different sections, such as strings and percussion that are blended together under the leadership of a conductor. Critics will write reviews of the symphony that are published in newspapers. The newspapers can determine which critics' reviews they believe make valuable contributions and which should not be published. The reviews from the critics may influence both how the conductor interprets the music for future performances and how the composer may approach their next score.

Relationship Between Conceptual Framework and Doctoral Study

Conductor

The conductor is the leader of the orchestra and is responsible for interpreting the music so that each section plays their part to combine for a beautiful symphony. Stone (2002) indicates that "interpretation is more powerful than fact". Different conductors may see the same music but may direct a particular section to play louder than another conductor would or they may change the tempo of the music. The conductor's interpretation of the music is constructed based on their prior experience (Bruner, 1996) with how they have heard others play it, their music education, and responses from critics on their interpretation of the music. The interpretation impacts how they will direct the orchestra to play.

The relationship to policy research is that policy research is interpreted by a variety of people responsible for its implementation. Policy research is conducted and implemented based on particular interpretation of the intention of the policy or policy research. For example, Walsh (2002) used a review of research on teacher certification to make recommendations promoting policy against traditional paths for teacher preparation. However, Darling-Hammond (2002) evaluated the same research and drew conclusions that were directly opposed to those of Walsh

(2002). Both researchers were looking at the same research but drew opposite conclusions based on their interpretation of the results.

As the leader, the conductor may choose from a variety of leadership styles. Three leadership styles that can be chosen are Machiavelli (2004) approach of “it is better to be feared than loved,” Hanh (2007) approach of mindfulness or the Wheatley (2006) approach of knowledge sharing and leading by building energy around concepts. There is more to leadership than the simple management of daily processes. Leadership entails creating a vision for an organization’s future, recognizing the steps necessary to realize the vision, and successfully implementing those steps.

Finally, the conductor must work within the music community by interacting with the musicians, donors, and other conductors. St. Clair (2008) discusses the importance of communities to further knowledge and ideas. Effective communities are composed of people from diverse backgrounds and welcome new ideas and thinking. Both Kuhn (1996) and Wheatley (2006) discuss the importance of sharing knowledge within a community. For Wheatley, knowledge sharing can bring strange attractors together. Strange attractors are people within an organization who would not typically interact with each other. Bringing strange attractors together allows a unique approach to a problem that may not be apparent for people working in isolation. Kuhn (1996) discusses the importance of the scientific community. Concepts are tested and results disseminated for a community of scholars to replicate and discuss. By working together as a community, a field can advance its knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon it is studying. However, according to the aforementioned example of Walsh and Darling-Hammond, the community may disagree and fail to collaborate effectively.

The participation of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) in different coalitions is an example of an organization participating in a community. NASDSE belongs to several coalitions that share their interests such as the Consortium of Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) and the Committee for Education Funding (CEF). Because there is strength in numbers, these coalitions work together to develop and advance their policy agendas. If the community is unable to agree then the coalitions will develop sign-on letters where those that support the policy position in question will sign on and those that don't will remain silent. .

Sheet Music

The sheet music in the conceptual framework represents policy. The sheet music is written by the composer, interpreted by the conductor, and implemented by the orchestra both by section and as a whole. Policy development can be interpreted through several models. Some examples of models are Kingdon's Multiple Streams model (Kingdon, 1996), the goals of Stone's Policy Paradox model (Stone, 2002), and the interactive framework of Co-construction (Datnow & Park, 2009). There is no universal model for policy development rather different models based on the context the policy being developed.

Policy is developed to focus on an issue in the present and simultaneously attempts to anticipate the impact of the same issue in the future. The goal is to solve a problem in the present while preventing either the problem from reoccurring or any other potential consequences of the policy in the future. For example, educational policy has attempted to resolve issues in teacher education, the achievement gap, and special education.

Current debates in teacher education policy focus on developing a quality teacher workforce and ensuring quality teachers in schools with students from minority and low

socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the debates on developing a quality teacher workforce is whether teachers with strong backgrounds in pedagogy are more effective than teachers with strong backgrounds in content knowledge. No Child Left Behind required teachers to be highly qualified meaning a strong background in both pedagogy and content knowledge. Traditional teaching programs require several years of preparation and graduates of these programs may leave the teaching field after only a few years of teaching. Alternative certification programs such as Teach for America or Troops to Teachers selectively accept individuals with prior content knowledge and provide a short course on pedagogy. The alternative models allow teachers to enter the field with less preparation and may focus on placing quality teachers in high need schools. There has been much debate in the policy arena regarding the effectiveness of both the traditional and alternative certification models.

The achievement gap is the discrepancy in achievement between students who are from minority/nonminority backgrounds and/or high/low socioeconomic backgrounds. The original policy that attempted to prevent achievement gaps was Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The purpose of Title I was to provide federal money for school districts that lacked the local tax base to appropriately fund a quality education (Cross, 2004). Providing federal money to low income school districts allowed those districts to provide a comparable quality of education as school districts with higher tax bases. The most current version of the ESEA, NCLB, has brought focus to the achievement gap by requiring school districts to disaggregate their achievement data by race and socioeconomic status. Current policies supporting the school choice and charter school movement have been applied to diminishing the achievement gap. Charter schools are able to break from the current educational model to provide innovative strategies, a longer school day, and a longer school year. For example, the

Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is a system of charter schools that have an extended school day and a longer school year. The teachers in these programs are available to their students in the evenings and weekends to help them with school work. Academic instruction is intensive to help students achieve at a higher level. Finally, the KIPP schools pride themselves on placing a positive emphasis on education and motivating their students to achieve to their potential.

Special education law was developed in the 1970s to provide educational programming to students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has been adapted several times since the original PL 94-142 to meet the needs of students with disabilities. For example, the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) indicated students with disabilities were dropping out of school, taking basic classes, and were not gaining postsecondary education or employment, at the same rate as their nondisabled peers. A policy solution to these issues was presented during the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 which required students with disabilities to participate in the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible. If students were exposed to the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers, then they would be more likely to stay in school, obtain postsecondary education, and become gainfully employed. When the NLTS was replicated the postsecondary outcomes for White students from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds had improved. The students who had not improved were in school districts that lacked the resources to properly implement the intended requirements of IDEA 1997 (Hehir, 2009).

Recommendations can be made for policy either during development or after its implementation through policy analysis. Examples of models for policy analysis can be found in Stone (2002) and Dunn (2008). Dunn (2008) provides an excellent model focused on policy problems, performance, expected outcomes, preferences, and actual outcomes. Within this

model he describes the processes associated with problem structuring, forecasting, monitoring, making recommendations, and evaluation. Policy analysis may be submitted or disseminated through a policy brief. The components of a policy brief may include a policy history, previous research, funding history, an analysis of association positions, and discussion of program evaluations. The components of the policy brief will be used to make recommendations for the policy being addressed.

Policies on teacher preparation, the achievement gap, and parental participation in special education decisions, are only a few examples of issues within education policy. All of them have been developed over time and are based upon the perceived needs at the time they were developed. Similar to sheet music, these policies went through revision before they were passed and implemented to maximize benefit to their audience.

The Audience

The audience listens to the symphony and may benefit from the music. However, there may be unforeseen consequences of attending the symphony such as staying out late and being tired the next day. In the conceptual framework, the audience represents the policy recipients. Policy recipients are the people for whom the policy was developed to benefit. The policy recipients of all educational policy are the students receiving an education. Though there are other recipients such as teachers who are affected by teacher preparation policy, the direct recipient remains the students. However, providing students with a quality education creates an educated citizenry and an employable workforce. Therefore, the secondary recipient of education policy is the population at large who may benefit from the thriving economy often associated with an educated workforce.

For example, one of the original intentions of special education law was to provide educational programming to students with disabilities. Educating students with disabilities would take individuals who are typically tax burdens and turn them into tax contributors (Ong-Dean, 2009). The appropriate educational programming is to be determined by a team of educators, the student's parents, and the student. The goal is to develop a plan that will provide the student with the disability (the policy recipient) with an education that will maximize their access to the general education curriculum. Special education will help the student become gainfully employed thus contributing to the economy.

However, there are times when there is disagreement over the appropriate services to help the student with disabilities access the curriculum. Parents and schools may have different perceptions of the student's abilities. The parent's right to participate in special education decisions are protected by procedural safeguards that provide due process when parent disagree with school decisions. If the due process is unsatisfactory, then the parent can pursue the case in district, circuit, and potentially, the U. S. Supreme Court. Many of the recent cases in the circuit court related to parental participation in special education decisions are associated with parents attempting to obtain private education for their student with a disability. The school has prevailed in the majority of these cases because they had an appropriate education available for the student.

Sections (Percussion and Strings)

The different sections of the orchestra, labeled as percussion and strings, represent the different areas of education policy such as teacher preparation, STEM, Title I, and Special Education. The aforementioned areas merge together to form the comprehensive whole of the American educational system. Special education exists within the context of general education.

Therefore, policies that impact general education also impact special education. For example, the adequate yearly progress requirements of No Child Left Behind require students in special education to also demonstrate proficiency in the core content areas. However, because the standardized assessments may be too complex for some students with disabilities, alternate assessments for a limited number of students are allowed to demonstrate proficiency. However, the alternate assessments are cumbersome for special education teachers to administer. The time and effort necessary for the alternate assessment are contrary to the intent of the last reauthorization of IDEA which attempted to limit the amount of paperwork required by special education teachers (H. R. Rep. 108-77, 2003). The conundrum of the paperwork burden and alternate assessments is an example of the different sections of the orchestra not playing well together.

An example of the sections of the orchestra attempting to play well together is when associations make recommendations to legislation to ensure legislation has a positive impact on their area of the education field. For example, to discuss their recommendations on the reauthorization of ESEA, NASDSE will meet with staffers on Capitol Hill to help ensure the reauthorization made ESEA compatible with the current version of IDEA. During the meetings, they may discuss the exact provisions of the reauthorization to ensure students with disabilities were considered when changes were being made to a large and comprehensive law.

Critic

The critic listens to the symphony and evaluates its performance based on prior knowledge or by comparing it to other performances. In the conceptual framework, the critic represents research. Education research focuses on either the relationship between variables or the processes associated with different phenomenon.

The relationship between variables is measured through quantitative methods and statistical analysis. Philosophically, quantitative methods are associated with a post-positive perspective. The post-positive perspective asserts that there is a single reality that can be objectively measured. Bias is controlled through research design and statistical analysis. Statistical analyses are used to measure the relationship between variables in an effort to discover the aforementioned reality. For example, a multiple regression model can be used to determine if class size, per pupil expenditure, and school district poverty level, are related to the proportion of students in a school that will be identified for special education. Research such as Hanushek (2009) apply statistical models to large databases to draw global inferences. Though macro inferences may provide a general understanding of global phenomenon, they fail to capture or delineate phenomena at a micro and more contextualized level.

Another benefit of statistical analysis is the ability to test the effectiveness of an intervention. There are a variety of statistical analyses and research designs that can be used to measure the effectiveness of an intervention such as pre-post testing or the golden standard of random assignment to treatment and control group with pre-post testing. The statistics indicate the probability that the groups differed as a result of the intervention. Recently, the effect size of the intervention has been calculated in research to determine the magnitude of the effect of the interaction.

The processes surrounding phenomenon can be studied through qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are in the constructivist paradigm which asserts that reality is a subjective phenomenon based upon the prior experiences of the observer. Within constructivism, reality is measured subjectively and more than one reality exists. The researcher identifies their bias towards a subject and describes their approach to what is being studied so the reader of the

research is completely aware of the bias and can interpret the research accordingly. Typically, qualitative methods collect data through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The researcher identifies themes and draws conclusions based on the connections of those themes.

The advantage of qualitative research is that though quantitative research identifies relationships between variables, qualitative research explains how the variables interact. For example, in studying parental perceptions of how schools communicate with them about special education rights and services, a researcher could quantify the perceptions with a survey. The data could be disaggregated by age of student, parental income, or disability type, but would not reveal what schools were doing that parents either liked or did not like. To gain a full understanding of the interactions would require interviews and observations. Collecting data in this way would allow the researcher to find meaning within the context of individual interactions.

Qualitative results are typically contextualized to the individuals and phenomenon being studied. Unlike the macro inferences made by researchers like Hanushek, the results from qualitative studies are not completely generalizable. However, qualitative methods provide a deep understanding of phenomena that can be used to generate a generalized theory. The generalized theory can both be explored further and refined through additional qualitative study or it can be framed in quantitative terms and analyzed statistically.

Policy research consists of framing issues, identifying variables associated with the framed issue, collecting data related to the framed issue, and using statistical analysis to determine the relationship between the identified variables. The results can be used to make recommendations to policy makers. However, case studies and qualitative results are also

meaningful to policy makers. Therefore, it is beneficial to conduct policy research with mixed methods to triangulate the findings in making recommendations (Desimore, 2009).

The Newspaper

The Newspaper can choose whether or not to print the critic's analysis of the symphony based upon the quality of the critic's contribution. Though research may appear in a peer-reviewed journal, the quality of the research may have several validity threats making the results and the conclusions questionable. Just because an article is published in a peer-reviewed journal does not mean it can be trusted. All research should be read with a critical eye.

Both Locke, Silverman and Spriduso (2010) and McEwan and McEwan (2003) provide criteria for evaluating the quality of research. The criteria focus on the logical connections between the statement of the problem, the review of the literature, the method, presentation of results, and the conclusions drawn from those results. Quality research is presented as a logical whole where an issue is studied and valid conclusions are drawn from the results.

The field of special education developed quality indicators for research in a special edition of *Exceptional Children* in 2005. The intent was to establish criteria for evidence-based practice within the field. The criteria were presented for the most popular research techniques in special education research such as single-subject (Horner, Carr, Halle, McGee, Odom, & Wolery, 2005), group experimental and quasi-experimental (Gersten, Fuchs, Compton, Coyne, Greenwood & Innocenti, 2005), and qualitative (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) designs. Horner et al. (2005) went so far as to suggest a threshold for the number of studies that would delineate when an intervention could be considered evidence-based practice. The criteria for these designs can be used to evaluate studies such as Jitendra,

Burgess, and Gajria (2011) who published a paper on the quality of research for reading interventions.

Assessing the quality of research is beneficial for research syntheses such as meta-analysis. There are two approaches to using study quality in meta-analysis. The first is to evaluate study quality and exclude studies that fail to meet the predetermined threshold of quality. The second is to evaluate the quality of studies and disaggregate the data based on the categories of quality. The disaggregation will demonstrate the impact study quality has on the effect size. The effect sizes of studies can also be weighted based on study quality so low quality studies do not school the grand effect size (Valentine, 2009).

The Composer

The Composer writes music based in the perceived needs and desires of the audience. Taking into account current tastes and other music, the composer attempts to write music that will be appreciated by every member of the audience. In the conceptual framework, the composer represents the policy maker.

According to the Kingdon (2003) Multiple Streams model, policy makers are looking for policy windows to open. When the policy window is open, if they can align their policy stream with both the political stream (interest groups) and problem stream (their ability to apply their policy to a problem) then they will likely be able to get their policy passed. For example, a policy window was opened by the goal of No Child Left Behind to reform education. In the summer of 2010, local budget shortfalls would result in the problem of approximately 140,000 teachers losing their jobs across the country. Losing such an extreme number of teachers from the education workforce threatened any positive trajectory of the current education reforms. A bill in the House of Representatives would provide \$10.1 billion in supplemental funding to

preserve those jobs representing a solution in the policy stream. However, the companion bill in the Senate did not contain the supplemental funding for education jobs. NASDSE, along with other members of CEF, sent letters to every senator requesting they amend the companion bill in the Senate to include the supplemental funding. The participation of the associations represents the political stream in support of the policy. The letters from NASDSE and other members of CED influenced the senate and they amended and passed the companion bill. The problem, political, and policy streams were able to align to save the 140,000 teaching jobs for the 2010-2011 school year.

Synthesis

Bringing the model together, the policy maker (composer) develops policy (sheet music) that applies to different areas of the educational community (sections; strings and percussion). The policy implementer (conductor) is responsible for interpreting the policy (sheet music) and implementing it to benefit the policy recipient (audience). Researchers (critic) are responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of the policy (sheet music) and if the evaluation is of a high quality, it will be published in a journal (newspaper). The publication (newspaper) can influence the policy maker (composer) for future policy (sheet music). The policy recipients (audience) can also influence the policy maker (composer) based upon their reaction to the policy (sheet music).

Going Forward

Using the conceptual framework of the orchestra, I will discuss my intentions for my dissertation. I plan to study parental perceptions of how schools interact with them about special education rights and services. In the conceptual framework, I see myself as the critic who will be conducting research on the issue. The research I conduct will be informed by the work of

previous critics on the issue. The sheet music is the requirements in IDEA and the Code of Federal Regulations for parental participation in special education decisions. The audience is both the parents of and students with disabilities who receive special education services. The conductor represents school personnel who must interpret federal, state, local, and school, policy related to parental participation. Their interpretation and leadership will guide the special education meetings. The different sections (string and percussion) represent the conductor's (administrator's) need to make special education decisions within the context of their general education environment. Should the dissertation be published in parts or in whole, the publication can be used to inform the composer or policy makers at the school, local, state, or federal, level in developing new regulations and legislation. Finally, the dissertation committee acts as the newspaper that will help guide my research and provide approval when it is acceptable.

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