

## **Research challenges in education policy: considerations on models and approaches**

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**Abstract:** Ongoing educational reforms carried out in Brazil and in other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, with emphasis on the policies defined for the sector, have been widely debated in the Brazilian educational literature. Reflecting upon these reforms brings to the fore the dynamics of ensuing plans, projects and proposals, and places, at the center of discussion, several conceptual and methodological difficulties encountered by researchers in the field. This situation requires theoretical elaboration and methodological discussion of policy analysis based upon an investigation of the literature on the subject. This is the aim of this text, which deals with issues related to research in Educational Policy by positioning them in the broader context of educational research. The discussion is divided into two parts that address: (a) the challenges of policy analysis, its existing models and approaches, and of educational policy analysis; and (b) some methodological aspects of research into educational policy.

**Keywords:** Educational policy. Educational Research. Policy analysis.

### **Desafios da pesquisa em política educacional: reflexões sobre modelos e abordagens**

**Resumo:** As reformas educacionais em curso no Brasil e outros países da América Latina e Caribe, com destaque para as políticas definidas para o setor, têm sido amplamente debatidas na literatura educacional brasileira. A reflexão sobre tais reformas coloca em questão a dinâmica de planos, projetos e propostas delas derivados e trazem para o centro da discussão diversas dificuldades conceituais e metodológicas encontradas pelos pesquisadores desse campo. Tal situação demanda elaboração teórica, bem como discussão metodológica sobre a análise de

Portela Moreira, L. (2016). Desafios da pesquisa em política educacional: reflexões sobre modelos e abordagens, v. 1, n. 1, pp. 90-104.

políticas, a partir de uma exploração da literatura sobre o assunto. Este é o objetivo deste texto, que trata de questões relacionadas ao campo da pesquisa em política educacional, inserindo-as no contexto mais amplo da pesquisa em educação. Divide-se em duas partes que abordam (a) os desafios da análise de políticas, seus modelos e abordagens, e das políticas educacionais, e (b) algumas questões metodológicas da pesquisa em política educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Política educacional. Pesquisa em Educação. Análise de políticas.

### **Desafios de la investigación en política educativa: reflexiones acerca de modelos y enfoques**

**Resumen:** Las reformas educativas en Brasil y otros países de América Latina y el Caribe, con énfasis en las políticas definidas para el sector, han sido ampliamente debatidas en la literatura educativa brasileña. La reflexión sobre estas reformas pone en tela de juicio la dinámica de los planes, proyectos y propuestas derivadas de ellas, y lleva al centro de la discusión una serie de dificultades conceptuales y metodológicas que encuentran los investigadores en este campo. Esta situación requiere una elaboración teórica y una discusión metodológica sobre el análisis de políticas, a partir de una revisión de la literatura sobre el tema. Este es el objetivo de este texto, que se ocupa de temas relacionados con el campo de la investigación en las políticas educativas, colocándolos en el contexto más amplio de la investigación educativa. El trabajo se divide en dos partes que abordan: (a) los desafíos del análisis de políticas, sus modelos y abordajes, y del análisis de políticas educativas, y b) algunas cuestiones metodológicas de la investigación en política educativas.

**Palabras clave:** Políticas educativas. Investigación en Educación. Análisis de políticas.

### **Introduction**

Contemporary globalization and neoliberal reforms in Brazil and other Latin American and Caribbean countries have been widely discussed in recent Brazilian education literature, especially the policies defined for the sector and the influences received from international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, among others. The reforms of the 1990s present as commonalities among various countries administrative decentralization, policies focused on vulnerable groups, emphasis on the idea of quality and equity and incentive to school autonomy and participation at various levels. Despite departing from a conception of homogeneous education, education policies put into action by different government levels reveal, according to Ricci (2003), heterogeneity of methods and results.

Reflection on such reforms call into question the dynamics of various plans, projects and proposals derived from them and bring to the discussion the analysis of the conduct of education policies, which lack theories and models suitable for the construction of relevant

criticism, besides demanding a certain amount of time for their impact evaluation. In this regard, there are many studies (Frey, 2000, Souza, 2003, 2006, Mainardes, 2006, 2009, Martins, 2013, Arretche, 2003) that, besides the problems already mentioned, indicate the existence of a gap between the elaboration and evaluation of social policies in general, and particularly education policies.

The study of public policies prioritizes as object of analysis the government into action, having as base major public issues and how to deal with them. However, as Serafim and Dias (2012) point out, these public issues cannot be solely understood in the context of the State's realizations, but also in the gaps left by it.

Defining public policy entails taking into account the contribution of various disciplines to the field, and, regardless of their primary attachment to political science, recognizing the multidisciplinary approach that characterizes it.

Also integrated by theories of Sociology and Economics, it is the object of interest of managers and researchers from various fields, including planning and Applied Social Sciences. It also means focusing on the conflicts between interest groups and different ideas, without losing sight of the locus where these confrontations happen. It is about a domain that, despite already relying on some theories and models, receives varied and necessary contributions for understanding its impacts on society and the inter relations between State, politics, economics and society (Souza, 2006).

Being that the study field of public policies is relatively recent and originated from consolidated democracies, there are many analytical difficulties encountered by researchers from different areas, including education. One has to consider the characteristics of the contemporary state and the difference between countries where these studies have emerged from and those who still seek to consolidate their democracies.

As for the education policies, it is the general consensus in recent Brazilian literature on the subject a fact that they are embedded in a field of study that has several conceptual and methodological difficulties. Some of these problems are attributed to the short existence of research lines on this theme in Postgraduate Programs in Education and the subordination of policy research to the government agenda, despite the growing effort of independent thinking being done, the growing number of publications and the recent establishment of

networks which bring together researchers on the theme. In general, one can say that it is also consensual the idea that little attention has been given to the implementation of studies, contrary to what happens with those related to decision-making processes (Faria, 2003, 2012, Passone, 2013). It is worth mentioning that this is not a sole characteristic of studies in Education.

In fact, it is on the idea of implementation and linearity of the *Top down* and *Bottom up analysis* that criticism devolves, both from outside authors and authors within the field of education, which also criticize the understanding of policy trajectories as a cycle consisting of linear succeeding steps.

In Brazil, we add to that some difficulties related to the history of the constitution of the field of the education policy studies, in its early days, linked to the principles of the classical management approach and, currently, characterized by little consistency of theoretical and methodological framework to guide and support their analysis, as well as little dialogue with the literature of Political Science and Social Sciences and the international literature (Mainardes & Gandin, 2013). Such situation demands theoretical elaboration on the subject, as well as discussion about its various analytical possibilities.

In this paper, we will deal with these issues and challenges brought by new theorization and approach proposals, which has the combined aim of promoting reflection on recurring problems of educational research and focus on the current research challenges in policies in this field, raising points for further investigation. This paper is structured in two main parts: (a) challenges of policy analysis in general and education policies; (b) some research methodological issues in education policy.

### **From the canonical policy cycle approach to the cycle policy approach**

In Social Sciences and particularly in the Political Science literature, there are various proposed approaches and models, both for evaluation and policy analysis. Policy analysis represents a research trend that emerged from the intersection of Political Science and public administration and has as its analytical tool the policy cycle, which comprises, in general, the formulation, implementation and evaluation of social policies.

In the ‘conceptual debate’ which occurred in 2000, Frey (2000, p. 214) referred to the emphasis on the sporadic existing studies, of the analysis of ‘[...] structures and institutions or the characterization of the negotiation processes of specific sectoral policies’, emphasizing the predominantly descriptive nature of micro approaches dissociated from the macro processes, among other critical considerations that, in the end, point to the theoretical and methodological weakness of this study field.

In this same work, Frey (2000) presents thought provoking critique of the use of analytical tools of policy analysis, which provide theoretical distinction between three dimensions of the policy, namely: the institutional dimension (polity), as regards the order of the political system; the procedural dimension (politics, related to the political process; and the material dimension (policy), which refers to the content of political decisions.

Frey recognizes the importance of policy analysis, but he draws more attention to the dangers of evaluations that try to reduce the political process to the relationship between independent and dependent variables, inadequate, in his point of view, for the analysis of empirical cases, which are often conflicting. Without failing to recognize the dependence, at least in part, between policies and institutional variable, Frey (2000) criticizes the idea that the concatenations between these dimensions are linear. He emphasizes the interdependence between institutions, policy content and the corresponding processes, as intertwined dimensions that influence each other.

In addition, as part of the policy analysis approach, Frey recognizes the temporal complexity and dynamic nature of political and administrative processes and understands the policy cycle as a useful heuristic model for analyzing the life of a public policy, and registers the existence of several proposals based on the idea of cycle, which, in his opinion, differ very little. In short, he proposed a distinction between the following phases: ‘[...] perception and problem definition, agenda-setting, program design and decision, policy implementation and, finally, evaluation of policies and possible corrective action’ (Frey, 2007, p. 226).

When commenting on the phase of implementation, Frey distinguishes the approaches that focus on material and technical quality of the programmes from those directed at the political and administrative structures and the role of the actors involved; of those who seek the causes of possible ‘[...] implementation deficits, from those who describe the

process, in other words, “the description of how and the explanation of why” (Frey, 2000, p. 228).

Also on the analysis of public policy, Sabatier (2007), in *Theories of the policy process*, presents a schematic course of this process, comprising the problem formulation, implementation of a solution and further evaluation in order to, in the process, discuss the complexity of this seemingly simple world, which, in summary, includes:

- (a) presence of hundreds of actors of interest groups at different levels of government, researchers, and others involved in the process;
- (b) time required for a policy to be properly evaluated for its impact;
- (c) profusion of programs involving the operation of government proposals on multiple levels;
- (d) debates on the legislative, litigation and regulatory proposals; and a final complicating factor:
- (e) most disputes involve value, interests, large amounts of money and, at some point of the process, coercion.

When analyzing several theoretical frameworks of the policy process, Sabatier (2007, p. 6) criticizes the division of the complex process of a phased policy stimulating researches related to specific stages<sup>1</sup>, as researches restricted to certain stages do not interfere with those held in other stages, disregarding, for instance, how the evaluation of existing problems can affect the establishment of the agenda.

In defense of the approach of ‘policy analysis’ as the one that can best contribute to the work on policies and improvement of the processes of formulation, implementation and evaluation, Cavalcanti (2007, p. 248) distinguishes this approach from that of ‘evaluation of policies’, although she recognizes that the two approaches have in common the

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Sabatier’s criticism is directed to one of the most popular models until the mid-1980s among American scholars, namely the ‘stage heuristics’ or ‘textbook approach’. To the author, until receiving the devastating criticism, for the reasons already mentioned, this model was very useful in the 1970s and 1980s.

understanding that policies run a cycle, which includes the identification of the problem that originates them to the analysis of their effects.

The evaluation would be, according to the canonical view of policy cycle, its last stage. In her criticism of the focus of the 'evaluation', the author denounces the claim of its neutrality when subsuming the politics dimension under technical criteria, as an evaluation is not referred to values and political interests; and outlines the evaluation as 'a game with only one round' '[...] where government action, expressed in policies, programs and public intervention projects is implemented without political obstacles along the way' (Cavalcanti, 2007, p. 248).

However, what do studies aimed specifically for the implementation processes of public policy say? What models are used in the general policy analysis and how are they appropriated and used in educational research? What issues are presented to the scholars of this domain?

The idea of implementation, object of criticism from scholars in this field generally give little attention to the procedural character of policies, that is to say, the politics dimension, regarding, according to Frey (2000, p. 217), the '[...] imposition of objectives, content and distribution dimension'.

The so-called implementation studies are basically divided into two models: top-down and bottom-up. According to the top-down model, the implementation of a policy follows the decision-making process. Originated from researches that, in the early 1960s to the end of the decade, in Europe, seek to reveal 'implementation deficits' (Passone, 2013), the top-down model, of positivist approach and influenced by American pragmatism, focuses on policy decision-making analysis at central level, while the bottom-up model focuses on the present power game at the local level of the practice of a policy.

It can be said that the main criticism directed at the top-down model refers to the idea that there is or there may be a causal linear relationship between the objectives, the actions planned to achieve them and the results. It is assumed, in this case, the rationality, predictability and verifiability of a process that, in fact, implies the interaction of numerous interests and a wide variety of actors that act both in the central line, from where the decisions departed, and the context of local realities. As an example of this model, we can

mention the evaluation of public policies in the service of State reform from the 1980s and 1990s, in a containment perspective of public spending and managing accountability, among other objectives. The bottom-up model, formed from criticism of the top-down model, contests the assumption that there is a perfect control of the implementation process, as its effectiveness depends on the groups to whom the policy is directed, which, endowed with discretionary power, not only can influence but also limit the implementation of the policy.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the contribution of the policy cycle approach proposed by Ball and Bowe in 1992 as a method for research in education policy, formulated from the results of an investigation on the National Curriculum implementation in England and Wales from 1988 (Mainardes & Stremel, 2015). This approach constitutes a heuristic device and conceptual framework for the analysis of education policies and rejects models that separate formulation and implementation and ignores the disputes and conflicts of the policy. The policy cycle approach considers the complex and controversial nature of politics, emphasizes micropolitical processes and the action of professionals involved in the practice level, thus allowing the analysis of the political trajectory throughout the cycle, from the context of influence to the results and policy strategy (Mainardes, 2006).

### **Macro/micro research dimensions in education policy**

From the contributions and criticism about policy research based on the tools of policy analysis, presented in the previous section, the verification of weaknesses and weak accumulation of knowledge in the field of education policy mentioned by several authors (Martins, 2013, Mainardes, 2006, Arretche, 2003) and the gap between policy and practice (Ball, 2011a), which focus should we give priority?

In Brazil, according to Ball and Mainardes (2011), researches in the field of education policy can be characterized by two types of approaches: (a) theoretical studies, focusing on the State's role, history and policy-making process; and (b) analysis and evaluation of specific policies. From this perspective, what we question, given the little time of research consolidated in this field, is to what extent is the interrelationship between researches that



give priority to the macro contexts and those that analyze the micropolitical. That is, if the results of the former are incorporated into the researches dealing with the context of practice and if the results of the latter have contributed to enrich the theorization of the field.

Regarding the macro/micro relationship in recent discussions of research in education policy, we can interpret as an approximation of the top-down and bottom-up models the tension resulted from the opposition between researchers that advocate epistemological supremacy of theories centered on the State and those who question the ability of these theories having real use for education and school. At this level of the debate, it is about the transformation of the contemporary society and the position that the analysis of the State occupies in the reflection on the policies that some of the main theoretical and methodological debates in the field are found. An example of this tension is Sally Power's response (2011) to the criticism of authors<sup>2</sup> for whom the investigations that do not take into account the centrality of the State and its inherent contradictions result in rich descriptions and accumulation of information, without presenting a more sophisticated theorization that takes into account the relationship between education and economy.

Power (2011) questions the validity of the claim that the State-centered theory is able to provide better and more adequate explanations of educational issues. To Power (2011, p. 67), the pursuit to establish '[...] direct and one-dimensional connections that link local processes with the State agenda ignores the fundamental complexity and contradictory of the processes'. Within the State-centered theory, Power (2011, p. 67) states that '[...] it is as if the concept was used to hide the confusion rather than clarify the process'. The author adds some criticism about what she calls the epistemological primacy claim and the numerous conceptual leaps based on unexamined, without empirical basis, and non-examinable assertions. It should be noted, however, that, by revisiting Dale's text, *The State and education policy*, twenty years later, Dale (2010) reaffirms the State's prominence in the field of education policies, but he warns that, under neoliberal globalization, changes in the nature of the State imply change in education policies. The State is no longer the same, and, perhaps, the most important difference is the fact that the State must be explained

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to Dale and Ozga (Power, 2011).

(*explanandum*), not representing the key factor for understanding education policies (*explanans*) any longer.

With regard to the research in Brazilian education, Brandão (2001, p. 161) demarcates the 1980s as the decade in which there was a 'hegemonic turn' and micro-social approaches started to dominate the research in education, from the '[... ] critique of positivism and the excessively generic character of statistical surveys - far from the problems of schools and classrooms'. The author's argument in favour of overcoming the methodological monism leads us to some ongoing issues in the epistemological discussion related to social research and, consequently, to research in education. Where should research start from? From developing hypotheses to be confronted with the real or the examination of facts? What is the place of theory in the field research? In a way, it brings back, with this question, an old opposition that Sabatier (2007) expressed well when, in relation to the criticism of top-down and bottom-up models and the formulation processes of a theory, he pointed out the shortcomings in both of the processes, as purely inductive and deductive, considering them extremely limited.

The idea that the development of a theory derived from the accumulation of facts arising from several empirical studies, in Sabatier's view, carries a positivist idea which assumes the possibility of the facts being observed without the mediation of beliefs and assumptions. The author criticizes, in the same way, the purely deductive approach with the argument that a purely axiomatic theory implies the assumption that theories are formulated in a vacuum, without interference of regularities perceived in aspects of the phenomenon in focus. In relation to this, maybe it is the case to clarify the limits of this false opposition. Avoiding the naive empiricism, the impressionistic descriptions or fragmentation in research does not necessarily mean that one should start from overly rigid hypotheses that, in Brochier's words (2006), can lead to a kind of 'empirical myopia', which induces the researcher to despise indicating clues of unanticipated problems, though worthy of observation. Pires (2008) inquires: Should one explore all objects in the same way, relying on a single epistemology, in a single type of data, in a single treatment of them or recognize that there may be other relevant aspects of the object that would be better or sufficiently well served by other ways of doing it? To Ball (2011b), research in education policy has several positions, styles and concerns. The author recognizes that the descriptive

empiricism still prevails in writings about research in education policy and draws attention to the importance of theory as a rich source of concepts and the necessity that they are multiple, in order to avoid reductionism, although this does not mean a license for inconsistency.

It is interesting to observe that the growth and the search for educational research consolidation in Brazil resumes, in a way, issues that, from the early 1980s until the first half of the 1990s, were object of heated discussions among researchers of this field about what it was conventionally designated ‘questions of theory and method’ in the published literature in some journals in that period<sup>3</sup>. It can be argued that some aspects of the current reflection of the epistemological study groups of education policy research could already be found at that time, although recent discussions show their proposals more clearly and explicitly with solid epistemological foundation, but less dogmatic, committed to moving the field forward, beyond innocuous polarizations and denunciation tone, so characteristic at the time. It is noteworthy, however, the presence of two problems already present at the time, namely: on the one hand, the pulverization of research in micro-studies, often confined to the experience of the researcher, as Warde (1990) noted; on the other, analyzes marked by a certain ‘pedagogical abstractionism’<sup>4</sup>. These analyzes, in the aforementioned context, served more to mark the affiliation of the researcher to certain ideological position than to make the field move forward, as most texts were written in a prescriptive and normative tone, based on what the research in education should be and not, in fact, what it was being performed in the field (Moreira, 2007). One of the consequences of these difficulties, as Alves-Mazzotti (2003) recalls, is that researches in this field lack relevance, reliability, transferability and, in fact, have not contributed to improving the quality of education, as the weaknesses of conducted researches and knowledge resulting from them do not catch the general public or policy makers’ interest.

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<sup>3</sup> The so-called ‘Theory of Crisis and Method’ of educational research was a largely discussed topic from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, especially in the pages of the journal *Cadernos de Pesquisa*. Bernadete Gatti, Marli André, Alda Mazzotti, Thiollent, Miriam Warde, Sergio Luna, Maria Laura Franco are some of the authors who were involved in this discussion. For further details see Moreira (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Expression coined by the educator José Mário Pires Azanha in his book “*Uma ideia de pesquisa educacional*” (*A view of educational research*), to refer to pedagogic essays characterized by superficial generalizations, inconsistent contents or insignificant results.

Finally, exposing the complexities, contradictions and paradoxes involved in policy requires, among other challenges, facing the tension between the macro-context, in which they are formulated, and micro-policies; between a larger explanatory structure and practice. It requires, as Ball (2011a, p. 42) warns, overcoming the gap between design and focus, and between the insulation and abstraction.

## **Final considerations**

In relation to education reforms formulated for Latin America and the Caribbean from the late 1980s, research in education policy has shown significant growth in recent decades, and numerous epistemological, methodological and technical challenges have emerged for scholars in this field. To contribute to this discussion, we presented, in this paper, some questions regarding the models and approaches of research in public policies and their repercussions in the relatively new field of education policy.

Despite admitting the specificity and peculiarities of research in education policy, it must be acknowledged that many of the commonly mentioned problems, such as poor accumulation of results of these investigations and their feeble impact on policy makers, in one way or another, have deserved, for some time now, the attention of researchers from the field of education, in which research policy is included.

By recognizing the complex and interdisciplinary nature of the field, we discussed the policy analysis contribution, with emphasis, in this approach, on the institutional dimensions (polity), procedural (politics) and material (policy) of the policies, as well as on the idea of cycle as a useful analytical tool for research in this field.

With reference to models and approaches, we exposed some limitations of the top-down and bottom-up models. In the former, the assumption of a linear relationship between objectives, planned actions to achieve them and the results; and, in the latter, the prior attribution to groups to whom the policy is directed the power to influence and/or limit the implementation of a policy. As a result, we highlighted the need to rethink the idea of implementation of policies, from the recognition of dynamic character of their trajectory: from the perception and definition of the problem to their evaluation and possible course of correction.

As for the specific field of research in education policy, in addition to the presentation of the policy cycle approach as an important heuristic device, we highlighted some recurring problems, placing them in the broader context of the Brazilian educational research. We especially focused on the persistence of the precarious interrelationship between studies that prioritize the analysis of macro-social dimensions of the phenomena and the role of the State and the policy-making process, in contrast to those which are limited, in many cases, to the description of the researcher's micro-experience.

Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to the necessity of overcoming these difficulties, in order to qualify the educational research in general and in the field of education policy in particular.

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