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Contingency as Policy

Can education policy adapt to evolving challenges?

In the rhetoric of our nation's leaders, as well as that of its citizens, one consistently finds dissatisfaction with the education system and its accomplishments. Over the last quarter century, government commissions, politicians, teachers, and countless other groups have called the current state of education a crisis, an immediate imperative, and a crucial priority if America is to maintain its presumed status as a global leader. The 1983 report *A Nation At Risk*, commissioned by Ronald Reagan's Department of Education, warned, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" (Gardner et. al., p. 9). And although we have imposed some new policy measures consistent with the recommendations of the report, today we find ourselves lamenting exactly the same problems. The most visible example of this phenomenon can be found in Barack Obama's first education speech as President, in which he stated, "America will not remain true to its highest ideals...if we don't do a far better job than we've been doing of educating our sons and daughters" (Transcript, 2009).

I do not wish to argue that policymakers must drastically alter their values. The political rhetoric today already acknowledges the moral imperative of making education better and fairer. What must change are the ultimate results we desire, the "solutions" we offer, our theoretical framework; in short, we must change our approach to policy-making in education. The approach over the last quarter century resulted in standards-based reforms that focused on achievement and accountability. This approach was in many ways innovative, forward thinking, and ethically sound, but it *did not* get us to equality or even quality in education for all. These policies have taken us as far as they can. Now, we must find something new, something other than this worn-out approach. In this paper, I will examine and define our approach to policy over the last 25

years as a *discourse of preparation*, and suggest a new approach, born from a *discourse of contingency*. This *contingency approach*, as I will refer to it, offers new ways to conceive of policy solutions in education by integrating constant reflection on action with dialectical thinking.

The Discourse of Preparation

Discourse functions, according to Foucault, in order to establish and maintain a given "regime of truth." Foucault argues that *truth as such* is a myth created by our discourses, and that men and women can only know "truth" insofar as it is defined by the dominant discourse of which they are subjects. Regimes of truth, such as that which privileges scientific knowledge as ultimate and undeniable truth, are closely tied to relations of power at work in a society. He describes this connection in "Truth and Power" (1976):

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 73)

In defining what can comprise true or false statements, a given discourse sets limits on our possibilities for action or change. The dominant discourse in education has certainly functioned in this way, restricting our efforts at school reform to only those measures related to standards and achievement thereof. Our educational regime of truth rewards those who know how to play the game or deliver the desired result¹, and it operates mainly through a *discourse of preparation*.

¹ Evidence of this fact can be found in test preparation booklets that advise students to "use the test to take the test" and offer various tricks to achieving a higher score.

When thinking of preparation, one most commonly thinks of preparation *for* something. Much of the daily language used in the classroom revolves around this topic. Teachers ask students to prepare for class discussions, tests, the rigors of the next level of education, and the "real world," to name a few goals. Ultimately, students are judged on how well they have prepared relative to other students, especially those abroad. These ends, especially that of surpassing foreign nations, are taken as having an intrinsic value and seen as attainable by simply memorizing and mastering the given content or skills. However, it may be possible that preparation for college is not necessary or valuable for some students, that the way in which students are prepared does not actually serve them well in the "real world," or that the aim of education should not be to advance a nation's power status relative to its neighbors. It is nearly impossible to determine whether students are sufficiently "prepared" for anything, or whether this state of preparedness (or un-preparedness) is beneficial to them. Furthermore, we may also miss the opportunity for a rich learning process if our focus is strictly on the desired result.

This sense of preparation resonates in Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), in which he examines this issue with a distinctive framing of childhood. Children, he says, "live proverbially in the present," and for them "the future just as future lacks urgency and body" (p. 52). Thus, to force an agenda of preparation for the future is to engage with the child only in terms of weakness or deficit, and not in terms of his or her strengths. This discourse of preparation can be, as I suggest, both all consuming and futile, but it can also be, as Dewey suggests, counterproductive to the healthy, natural development of the child.

Is it any more or less useful to imagine the preparation *of* something—in this case, of students? Such a scenario appears to shift the emphasis from the product to the process of preparation. Envisioning the student as a continually evolving individual who *is preparing*

seems to address the problem of a fixed endpoint. However, the difference here is purely semantic. We have merely changed the label on the final goal from some "state of preparation" to some "prepared individual." In placing these labels side by side, it becomes easy to see that they are two sides of the very same coin. The concept of an ideal "prepared individual," however, does reveal another problematic aspect of the discourse of preparation: in Dewey's words, that conformity has become "the essence of education" (p. 57). As noted above, students may be and may envision themselves on very different paths through life, and the imposition of preparation for a given generic path does not always or necessarily serve them well.

Furthermore, a look at the problems the present generation of leaders is facing shows the utter impossibility of being definitively "prepared" for the future. President Obama certainly never attended a lecture on "Leading America Out of the Financial Crisis of 2009," and he cannot simply apply the facts and formulas he memorized to arrive at a solution. Even in the simplest sense, we cannot be prepared for everything; a woman who keeps all of her money under a mattress because she is preparing for a bank to fail is not prepared for her house to burn down with all of her money inside. These seem like extreme examples, but they demonstrate the inherent contradiction in assuming preparedness can be achieved. Even the most "prepared" individuals, by whatever standard one wishes to apply, do not succeed without the flexibility to confront challenges as they come, and a discourse, or a policy, emphasizing preparation only cannot incorporate this fact.

The discourse of preparation is all encompassing. We use it to justify nearly every moment of classroom—as well as social, cultural and political—interaction. It exists as our primary means and ends in schooling and as its own justification, which actually means that it

exists without a real ("material"²) justification. This, of course, is the very essence of discourse. Discourse perpetuates itself by claiming to be the sole arbiter of truth, making it possible and necessary for its subjects to reject all contradictory evidence on the basis of its own premise alone.

One can see this discourse play out in the policy solutions that have been offered and that can be offered under this kind of regime. Two landmark pieces of education legislation represent the approach to policy that has resulted from the emphasis on "preparation" and competition with foreign nations. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act advanced the goal of preparation for "responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment" through tests of competency at the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade levels and mandated a review of state education standards and development of national standards by a newly created National Education Goals Panel (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994). The No Child Left Behind Act focused again on academic achievement and adherence to national standards, requiring states to develop assessments at certain grade levels in order to receive federal funding (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). These measures are known as outcome-based or standards-based education reform, and they are representative of the *preparation approach* to education. In this approach, the only way to measure success is by testing the individual's level of preparedness. Indeed, the discourse of preparation for competition and the imposition of preparation-based reforms or policies serve to perpetuate one another, as each needs the other to maintain the regime of truth that grants power to the "prepared" or "preparing" individual.

² Marxist theory divides society into a "material" base, comprised primarily of economic factors such as working conditions and wages, and an immaterial superstructure, which includes politics, language, culture, and other socially constructed categories. Although I would more strongly agree with the post-Marxist idea that the "material" includes more than just economic factors, I believe that a distinction can and should be made between real conditions and assumption.

Despite Foucault's warnings of the power and thoroughness of a regime of truth, however, he does not strip the individual of his ability to resist. Quite the contrary, he argues that power only exists where resistance to that power is possible. In other words, power is only present where the subject of power also has freedom, or the power to choose; where the subject of power *also exerts power*.³ Thus, those of us who make policy or think about making policy have the power to create an entirely new discourse for education. I argue that this is not only a possibility, but an imperative if we hope to enact policy that gets us closer to our goal of equality in educational opportunities and outcomes.

The Discourse of Contingency

If I may return to Dewey's conception of preparation, we find an extremely important feature of his work and that of many other great thinkers on education. The feature I am talking about is a resistance to absolute or extreme arguments. Dewey does not reject our values and say that everything that we think about education is wrong, but he does challenge us to reexamine our thinking and expand it. For example, he writes, "The mistake is not in attaching importance to preparation for future need, but in *making it the mainspring of present effort* [emphasis added]" (p. 53). We can and must concern ourselves with the future, but not at the expense of losing what is valuable in the present. The key to this kind of thinking may be found in a *discourse of contingency*, whose most important element is a view of the world that is not just black and white, but includes every shade of gray. Engaging with a contingency approach means accepting the role of chance in history, understanding the futility of trying to predict what specific skills the future will require and the absurdity of imposing the same standards and

³ A relationship in which the subject does not possess any power, by contrast, is a relation of domination or force, not of power.

equipping teachers with same tools in diverse classroom situations, and considering the successes and the failures of the past to be useful tools for learning.

The foundation of the discourse of contingency lies in creating a space where conflict and contradiction are possible and productive. Indeed, a major obstacle to the integration of contingency into thinking about education is the tendency of the human mind to think only in binaries. The dominant common sense tells us that "those who can't do teach," that our schools are either succeeding or they are failing, and that a policy either holds teachers accountable or it does not. In each of these examples, the *explicit* argument is that situations can be one way or another, but never both ways. Seemingly and actually opposing scenarios, it is argued, can never occur simultaneously. In other words, human interaction can occur in terms of either/or, but never in terms of both/and.

This logic can, however, be quickly dismantled. Not only *can* people engage in both/and moments, but people actually *exist* dialectically, in opposites. For each inhaled breath, we must exhale. The very processes of being alive are ultimately the causes of death. I argue that human systems and institutions exist in a similarly dialectical way. A school, for example, may be "succeeding" in one regard and "failing" in another; and there exist infinite possibilities for defining and measuring this success or failure. The challenge lies in translating this dialectical existence into policy—and also, necessarily, practice—that can incorporate the infinite variability of human interaction.

Achieving such integration will require the addition of a second element to our approach. In order to not only think dialectically, but also to create policy that can adapt to dialectical situations, it becomes necessary to constantly reflect. Reflection is an invaluable assessment tool, because it can tell us both *what happened* and *how it happened*. It grants access to process

as well as product, enabling an evaluation of the relationship between ends and means and insight into the reasons that we got the results that we got. Maocir Gadotti (1996) demonstrated the ways in which such an approach to teaching and learning can be transformative for teachers, students, and classroom interaction. The term "praxis," around which much of his discussion centered, refers precisely to the process of acting and reflecting concurrently *as* practice. I believe that this process can and should be transferred to the field of policymaking as well.

By introducing praxis and praxiological thinking into the policy process, we greatly expand our ability to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of our policy. Of course, the nature of legislation requires policies that can be translated clearly into plans, goals, and action steps. I do not propose that our leaders should take away these measures and govern based on principle or ideals alone, without regard to practical limits. Quite the contrary, I propose that reflection be used constantly to identify limitations and that strategies that are not achieving results be altered, even if they are operating "according to plan." Reflection may also expose new areas that policy must address in order to reach its goals.

For example, when we observe that test scores in a poor neighborhood in Detroit are far lower than those in Greenwich, Connecticut, we could respond by demanding that the Detroit schools raise achievement to the level of students in Greenwich or face a loss in federal funding. This is essentially the way achievement has been addressed by current policy, and indeed, American citizens can generally agree that Detroit students ought to be able to perform well on standardized tests. However, a more broad reflection would reveal many underlying causes of the problem that cannot be relieved by raising standards, such as differences in school funding levels and access to tutoring services, or the necessity for many students from poor families to get an after-school job instead of studying in the evening. We know already that these issues

exist in many school communities, but have not yet brought it under the purview of education policy. We cannot wait for the market to fix our schools.⁴ Instead, we must reflect on the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of previous and current policies, and find ways to address problems that have previously been left out of our policy initiatives.

Dialectical and praxiological thinking, when combined, comprise a contingent, evolutionary view of education. Constant reevaluation of policy and the results thereof enables adaptation to a society such as ours, in which dialectical tensions form and resolve continuously. A *contingency approach* to education policy would work to empower schools to respond to unique environmental or situational factors, to require relentless evaluation of schools (and evaluation of tools for evaluation!), and to adjust to changing circumstances as needed. This kind of policy must be stable enough to provide real guidance and support for schools and those who use them, while remaining flexible enough to continue to be useful as society endlessly and incessantly evolves. As such, contingent policy will seek not to control schools, as we currently do through standards-based policy, but to assist and strengthen them.

Of course, the challenge of creating policy that operates in this way must not be ignored. This approach has not been attempted on a large scale, and no one can say for sure how it would play out in the "real world." However, this fact is actually true of every policy approach or initiative, because schools function as a piece in a complex puzzle of social forces and not in a vacuum. The contingency approach to policymaking actually possesses an advantage over past efforts because it necessarily implements mechanisms that allow for variation in response to the

⁴ Economic conditions provide just one example of an outside factor that can have an impact on classroom interaction. In reality, a wide variety of social forces are at work at the same time, which makes the challenge to educators that much greater.

needs of different schools or communities at different times. The discourse of contingency mandates that policy be designed with the inconsistencies and uncertainties of the educative process in mind. Without this feature, policy cannot further advance the cause of equal access to education.

Attempts to apply the contingency approach must, I think, seek input from multiple sources beyond the realm of public policy. These sources include practitioners at all levels of education, including administrators, guidance counselors and teachers. More importantly, policymakers must invite parents and especially students to recommend policies that make sense to them and to give feedback on how programs have worked, or not, in their schools. Our schools should be serving the unique and valuable individuals that they encounter, not trying to force these students into molds that may not be a good fit. I argue that the best way to achieve this better and more personalized service for our students is through the contingency approach to both policy and practice. Contingency can only arise as the norm in educative practice after policy affords a space in which that practice is not only possible, but actually encouraged.

Writing from his prison cell in Fascist Italy, Antonio Gramsci argued that political solutions cannot be proposed unless they have already been made possible by material conditions. I would today extend this also to educational solutions (although, indeed, the educational is always-already political). The current education policy, then, represents the best solutions available to the field of education in the past, but it is important to recognize the infinite possibility for better policy solutions in the future. In fact, policymakers are morally obligated to search for and work toward these improvements, instead of continuing to prescribe the same old medicines to which our schools have built up a tolerance. Before we can do this,

we must realize that this is necessarily an ongoing process, that we will not and *cannot* find a "perfect" solution, but that resigning the field to the attitude of "that's just the way it is" dooms our education system to a downward spiral in achievement by any standard or measure.

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