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Research Needs in the Politics of Canadian Education

It has begun to be generally appreciated that the conduct of research in education should be as resourceful and varied as its vast topic, embracing as it does all that is done under the auspices of the word 'civilization'. Approaching the politics of education in Canada as a relatively new field, Nelson reviews no fewer than thirteen dimensions of choice that the researcher should be aware of, with the intention of generating significant topics and treatments. He proceeds to illustrate with a number of current topics that seem to him to demand investigation, setting out the treatments that appear to be indicated for each.

The emergence of politics of education as a mature area of inquiry in Canada seems to have occurred very suddenly. In fact there has been a gradual shift in attention to political variables and perhaps a related politicization of educational decisions in the world we study. The attention given by Canadian researchers is reviewed in an AERA publication, the *Politics of Education Bulletin* (Townsend, 1977a). Further successful activity is evident in the 1977 yearbook of the Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE hereafter), *The Politics of Canadian Education* (Wallin, 1977). Proceedings of a more recent two-day national conference on *Educational Research and Policy Formation* have now augmented these (CEA, 1978). Given this evidence that we represent an active and surprisingly well-grounded field, it is appropriate to consider where we might go now.

In the first half of this paper I consider how researchable ideas can be generated, analyzed, and compared. To this end a list of thirteen questions is provided, questions which draw attention to different dimensions, dichotomies, typologies, or continua which lie behind research topics. In the second half of the paper, from the several thousand possible combinations of responses to those questions, I have selected a dozen answers. That is, I present twelve major research topics which are judged to be timely, interesting, and potentially informative. Now, to the questions.

First, where does any given research endeavour fit in the continuum between purely basic and purely applied research? Kerlinger's (1977) argument that the needs of practitioners are best served by quality basic research makes one case concisely and eloquently. We are concurrently reminded by Wirt (1977), however, that research in politics in education should be "useful" to scholars in the field, to school policy makers, and to practising administrators. Thorough and informed discussion of this issue is available in the CEA publication *Educational Research and Policy Formation* (1978) mentioned above. Few single efforts will serve all of these demanding masters, but it seems reasonable that a researcher should at least recognize which audience might be informed by his work.

Second, does the research follow a policy issue through all levels, from the highest government level involved through classroom impact, or does it focus on the range of policies and other variables interacting with it at one given level (see Kirst and Grossman, 1972)? For example, do we focus on manpower policy in the sixties from the federal government through the auto shop, or do we observe how this program was related to other decisions taken at the school board level in the same period? Do we study the vertical or the horizontal context of policy? Clearly one could do both, but only for a single policy issue at a time, and then with difficulty.

Third, following logically, is the research primarily concerned with events at the federal, provincial, or local level? Within "local" is nested the variable "community", however. Also, there is a type of inter-provincial interaction which is conducted by a quasi-political body called the Council of Ministers of Education. More on that later. There are some high quality comparative studies which illustrate the potential of this level (for example, Lawton, 1975; Manzer, 1976). Comparative studies may profitably compare districts, provinces, or nations.

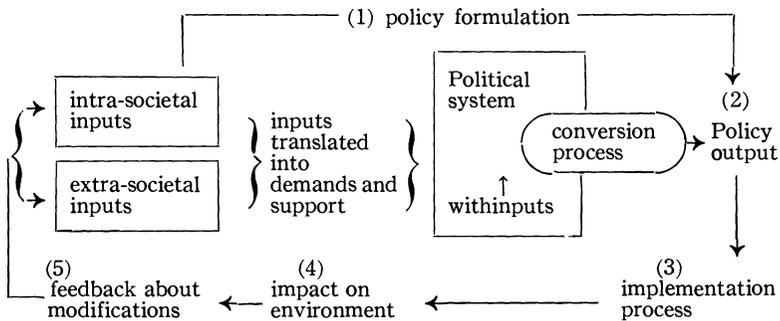


Figure 1
Diagram of the Policy Process Based on Easton (1965) and Hawley (1977).

Fourth, what dependent variables may be researched? Let us modify Easton's systems model (1965) to illustrate one way of identifying these.

We can extract five stages from this model. Hawley developed four categories: "(1) studies of policy formulation, (2) studies of policy outputs, (3) studies of implementation, and (4) studies of policy impact" (1977, p. 321). Hawley echoes Crecine (1972) in calling for more emphasis on the impact category, so that we know, literally, whether the previous three are worth further study at all; recent successes in the U.S. include work by Spady (1976), Bidwell (1975), and Wiley (1976), and Canadian studies by McDairmid (1977) and Traub et al. (1976) show similar documented impact. The actual process whereby impact becomes feedback (5) is conceptually distinct, however ambiguously so, from (4) and (1).

It seems reasonable to argue that any policy study would be improved by including more of these steps. My undocumented impression is that the majority of Canadian scholars in our field have administration and organization theory orientations. That implies both a gap and a strength, in that we may already possess many tools for study of the later stages in this process, though fewer appropriate to the first two.

Fifth, what independent variables shall be examined as having impact on the political system? We might explore historical, cultural, economic, or ideological variables, among others. For example, there are historical phenomena that are rarely used in explaining current decisions. In Ontario we have a fine encyclopedic work (Fleming, 1971), but no analytic work at a provincial or national level equivalent to Callahan's (1962) in the U.S. The related concept of culture, especially political culture (Iannacone, 1975), remains under-exploited by Canadian researchers. The obvious but often unproductive question of leader influence is available, as are concepts like ideology, popular mythology, and comparison of the British and the French traditions. I believe many of these variables have real impact on policy outcomes. I further predict that their effects would be best thrown into relief by comparative studies; witness the recent bi-national studies of elite accommodation by Robert Presthus (1973 and 1974). In Canada, comparative interprovincial studies might also provide sufficient contrast.

Sixth, what theories, what major frameworks shall we use? For example, Dye (1975) provides the following seven "models for policy analysis: institutionalism, group theory, elite theory, rationalism, incrementalism, game theory, and systems theory." Commenting on the lack of cohesiveness in past research, Wirt asserts that "With no star to guide them, scholars select problems as the winds of swirling preferences move them" (1977, p. 6). He does, however, see some consistency, if only faddism, in the winds: "The prevalent analytical framework, which some call 'theory', is that of David Easton's systems an-

alysis" (1977, p. 2). It is interesting to note that in the CSSE yearbook published the same year (Wallin, ed., 1977) not one of fifteen studies used a political systems framework. Nor was any other framework favoured, although it is worth noting that the most common recurring concern was with interest groups. Many were frankly atheoretical, choosing only to describe. (I would interject that few scholars in either country have seen fit to look behind Easton's model to the General Systems Theory which preceded it. There are implications of that model which remain under-explored.)

Still, considering the past several years' work, some of the strongest Canadian studies are in the area of interest group involvement (see Townsend, 1977a). We may be in a position to contribute to theory in that area. For a country with such historical and present dependence on elites, we have precious little research on elite preference in education (Newman, 1975; Presthus, 1973 and 1974). While we agree that incrementalism abounds, I don't know that it has been explored in Canada as an explanatory model in politics of education (Mann, 1975; Schoettle, 1971). Further, since so many Canadian members of the politics of education field have backgrounds in organizational theory, use of that avenue could be a way to start from strength. For example, Weick's 1976 article on loosely coupled systems informs both political and organizational models, and is likely to have great influence on both.

Seventh, whatever one's intent concerning theory-building, there are a variety of disciplines from which input may come. We have acknowledged the parentage of political science and education administration. History and economics are logical yet under-used contributors. Sociology and anthropology have influenced the field; organizational psychology may be an even larger contributor (see Janis, 1972, for an interesting example). Each to his favourite, but two caveats. One, the disciplinary stance of the researcher will colour the questions asked — which is even more important than influencing the answers. Two, if to call for multidisciplinary efforts is trite, it is not because we have had too many of them.

Eighth, in terms of methodology, shall one take a traditional, a behavioural, or a subjectivist stance? These three major methodological approaches in turn reflect philosophical approaches. The classical or traditional approach seems to dominate Canadian politics of education, and was found by Wirt to be alive and well in the U.S. (Wirt, 1977). Behavioural approaches (Eulau, 1963; McCoy and Playford, 1967) have not made quite the headway in politics of education that they have in the mainstream. There is a third strand, different from both, but not mutually exclusive from either. This is the subjectivist approach, including "participant observation," "field methodology," and other near synonyms. There are numerous recent references, but the philosophical issue is best illustrated in recent exchanges between Greenfield (1977), and Griffiths (1977). Again, obviously the choice

of approach has great implications. The question of sample size is relevant here. The researcher may seek a case study, comparative case studies, a survey, or a national sample — among many other options.

Ninth, another dichotomy can be illustrated thus: are there some issues which can be extracted, via research, from the domain of politics and values, and put into a rational model? Is it hopelessly naive to expect that there are some educational issues for which a final, rational, professional solution exists? Will class-size forever be decided on the power, finances, or relative charisma of teachers and administrators? Will we always be dealing politically with questions of corporal punishment, grade 13 in Ontario, core curriculum, mainstreaming as against “pull-out” programs, and so on? Certainly putting some of these ghosts to rest would contribute greatly to education, if not to the politics thereof (McCarthy, 1976).

The *tenth* question is nearly redundant. In Townsend's *Bulletin* (1977, p. 17), Bordeleau and others sort research into four categories: philosophic-historic, theoretic-analytic, comparative, and autobiographical. All but the latter category have been mentioned here, but I think it is worth retrieving this Bordeleau typology as a concise reminder that our field can be sliced several ways, and that in many of these it goes on further than one might expect.

Eleventh, does the research focus on the effects of politics on education? Or does it examine how educational practices affect political institutions and behaviours? Most of the previous typologies or questions focus on political processes and perhaps on subsequent impacts on education. The reverse question, the question of political socialization (see Kirst, 1972, all of part 2), asks how the educational experience influences political institutions and behaviours. In turn these outcomes help to shape the educational process. If politics changes education, it is equally true that educational activities influence their political environments in turn. While both foci exist in the Canadian literature, rigorous attempts to close the loop — to examine both effects at once — might give added meaning to existing work.

Twelfth, what shall the researcher be like in person? This is logically a non sequitur, I suppose, but an irresistible one. Awareness (at least) of the factors which shape our selves is a desirable state. For example, what training do most of us bring? More fundamentally, who are we? I know of no exhaustive listing of Canadians interested in this area. What institutional arrangements support us? What data bases do we share? Should there be a computer-searchable data base? a yearly conference? a flagship journal? a national discussion on training? What funding beyond the contractual type is available? Have we finally discovered that it is Canadian content, not citizenship, which is the legitimate national goal? While answers to these do not truly help one select a research path, it is useful to give visibility to some variables which do constrain possible choices in that search. Surely the re-

searcher in person is at the core of the research.

Thirteenth, last, can we consider events in the absence of ideals? One drawback of the behavioural approach is to divert our attention toward increasingly sophisticated explanations of what is — and away from the essential question of political philosophy, “what ought?” The search for justice through philosophical principles is no less rigorous or scientific than high behaviouralism. If political choice is to be more than organizational drift, it must be as well informed by principle as by opinion poll.

That concludes the survey of thirteen questions which help to shape and describe research projects. Let us now examine a dozen sample answers to those questions.

A sample of research tasks: provincial and federal politics

Here is the first idea for research in politics of Canadian education. I will not demonstrate explicitly how all of the research ideas arise from the thirteen questions, but for this initial one I think it useful to be specific and thorough.

An acquaintance of mine is a member of the provincial legislative assembly (MLA) in Ontario. He reminds us outsiders that educational policy is never created in a vacuum. Rather, educational issues must compete for time, for data, for funds, with pressing concerns from health, employment, fiscal policy, corrections, recreation, and others. Educational decisions often have direct implications for other areas. For example, expansion of comprehensive high schools lowered the drop-out rate, reduced apparent unemployment, enhanced the skill level and expectations of new workers, served a custodial function, and consumed great amounts of money! In Ontario, such decisions are taken at the *senior ministry and cabinet levels*. The processes by which this occurs have been invisible; could there be a study of this process of conflict resolution at the cabinet level?

Let us now investigate how such a study would be given form by answering the thirteen questions posed above. The study would be basic research (if I designed it) and would be a horizontal description of a single province, at least at first. Dependent variables are policy process and policy output. These are hypothesized to be influenced by at least these independent variables: political culture, economics, conflict patterns, institutional structures, leadership variables, ideology, and precedent. All models of policy formation would be enriched, some would be supported by this study. Useful disciplinary foci that come to mind are political science, social psychology, and anthropology. I would recommend (ideally) a subjectivist, field-based study, a rich, qualitative approach. The issue is essentially political though it does ask whether some decisions are rationally made. There would

be little direct reference to the effects of decisions on society, nor on socialization or subsequent feedback. The study as described is theoretic-analytic; it could easily be autobiographical. The researcher would need a rich general background (especially in parliamentary processes), a qualitative orientation, verbal fluency, and time. Whether there is any moral or philosophical base for decisions is germane.

The above demonstrates how attention to the thirteen questions can help a researcher turn an interesting idea into a more thorough statement of purpose. Let us now examine eleven other ideas for research in the Canadian politics of education. Each of these has received as much thought, though it will here receive considerably less space than this first example.

This second item may be considered a very "special case" of the above. In *Quebec*, recent legislation has required all immigrants to the province to be schooled in French regardless of their mother tongue. Other Quebec language policies are similarly closed; all this is presented as necessary to cultural survival. Is that the reason? Or is it merely a use of educational policy as a "banner" prior to the promised referendum? Or as a weapon, prior to negotiating with Ottawa about Constitutional changes? What unique responses from parents have resulted (for example, see Townsend, 1977b)? Since information on this issue is ubiquitous, I'll be brief here. I would redirect interested readers to the Townsend (1977) review and to the 1977 CSSE year-book.

The third research idea was suggested by several colleagues: *the role of the Ministries of Education*. Williams (1977) reviews a number of studies emphasizing the power of these agencies, especially compared with their U.S. counterparts. What are their historical antecedents? Do they change the ability to have impact on school boards? on children? My own research in Michigan and Ontario (Nelson, 1977 and 1978) suggests that neither central agency is able to cause fundamental change in school practice. The implementation process seems to be much harder to manipulate than the prior political steps.

The fourth research topic is also at the provincial level, but it is much more explicit. The Ontario Ministry recently adopted a policy document called *The Formative Years* (1975) regarding K-6 curriculum. This child-centred policy, which seeks a marriage of the best ideas of Dewey and Piaget, was apparently chosen by a rational process, a true case of policy influenced by theory. Even more recently, however, high schools were required to reintroduce a "core curriculum." This was a relatively retrogressive step, and appears to have been made on political grounds to assuage the "back to the basics" movement. *How could two similar policy questions receive such different treatment and outcomes?* Changes in societal values, the "stingy seventies," minority governments, all come to mind. This is a very rich area for study.

A fifth question brings us to *the federal-provincial interface*. Sixty federal departments and agencies provide two billion dollars annually to education (Bergen, 1977), about 20% of all such expenditures (Lucas, 1977a). Most of this is channelled through provincial governments via cost-sharing arrangements. There is no federal department of education, rather the Office of the Secretary of State acts to co-ordinate federal initiatives. The ten Ministers of Education meet in a body called the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). They engage in politically bland acts such as "... monitoring of second language programmes, involvement in the programming of Canadian school broadcasts... gathering statistics in education, ... educational exchanges... exchange of information about curriculum policies" (Bergen, 1977, p. 11). Still, the CMEC is a forum for discussion and possible consensus about a range of shared problems. It is criticized for excluding interest-group input, for operating in secret (or at least in private), for being insulated from the electorate and thus not accountable, and for constituting another elite (Bergen, Lucas, 1977a, 1977b). Whatever the level of truth of these charges, we know two things. One, CMEC and the Secretary of State wield considerable power. Two, not much else is well known about either organization. Required: a rich descriptive study of each by means of interview or (ideally) participant observation.

The recent OECD Report (1975) criticized Canada for a lack of explicit federal policy in education, concurrently recognizing the lethora of *de facto* policies. Comparisons of the impact of the relatively weak Canadian and stronger U.S. federal government might be enlightening. Many Canadians would prefer more federal involvement in education. Do they understand the costs? It seems to me that a description of "what is" should precede any response (or premeditated non-response) to the OECD charge. For example, a colleague of mine disagrees with all of the above criticisms, arguing that the CMEC functions legitimately and effectively as a buffer between the federal system and the semi-autonomous provincial subsystems, as would be predicted from General Systems Theory (Hanley, 1977). The task of generating and examining such alternative views of both CMEC and the Secretary of State as educational organizations should be a national priority.

Politics at many levels

The sixth topic cuts vertically through all jurisdiction. *Indians in Canada* are educated in federal schools, in provincial schools, in schools run by school boards, and in schools run by independent Indian bands. All four of these arrangements exist within an hour's flight from many Canadian universities. It is apparent that we as a nation have failed to educate our native people either to maintain their present culture or to be assimilated into the white "mainstream." Certainly conflicting goals are part of the problem. I am particularly interested

to know, in a definitive way, what political, organizational, and cultural variables facilitate or frustrate progress in this arena (note McDairmid's clever 1977 contribution). There is much to be learned about intergovernmental and intercultural processes from such a study. This task could also be approached on an applied level, since we have a documented failure to remediate. If this is a case in which government-level, programmatic solutions are useless, let us describe what makes this so. There is no more practical study than one which identifies one's limits. What a rich vein of knowledge for a multidisciplinary team to explore!

Seventh, *declining enrolments*. I argue that this topic has not been "overdone" in terms of scholarly research, in spite of its omnipresence in the media. Much of the research which has been conducted is crisis-oriented, overly "applied" and "politically" generated. Yet a more reflective reanalysis of these data might be very productive. For example, here are some questions whose answers may be available but unanalysed. Will decline lead to increased political conflict as March (1973) predicts? Or will the need to manage an increased potential for conflict over shrinking resources lead to more rational (or "scientifically rational") decision processes (see Mann, 1975)? Will a stable staff mean more and more stable information and skills, facilitating the decentralization of school districts? Will declining resources lead to declining impact? Will schools reap the harvest of non-support from a public whose political socialization was inappropriate? Will the apparent lack of philosophical strength in education emasculate educators defending their systems from decline? These are questions for which broad, sensitive, quantitative techniques are truly appropriate, though the validation of findings by subsequent detailed field research would also be desirable.

The eighth focus is on *the teachers' federations*, which face declines in the economy, in enrolments, in public support, and in clear monetary goals. Decline may force conflict as federations become protectionist. It is possible that local goals and procedures may deviate from provincial ones. Alternatively, federations may be mature enough to share in elite processes, to operate in a consociational mode (Lucas, 1977b, p. 4). Pross (1975) would argue that mature interest groups would come to share in consensual governance as do Canadian business interests (Newman, 1975) whereas newer groups would be more militant and more oriented to single issues. This is an "elite plus group vs. the system" model, and a documentation of the phenomena would support all three ideas. Would this, or other adaptations, constitute goal succession (Sills, 1957)? Such questions, like the previous issue, would profit from broad quantitative treatment supplemented by some field studies of major local and provincial federations.

The ninth issue is the timeless question of *separate schools* in Canada. While the Canadian "constitution" supposedly guarantees the availability of Roman Catholic separate schools, provinces vary. They

range from zero provision for direct provincial aid (Manitoba) through reasonable but incomplete support (Ontario) to a totally dual system (Saskatchewan). Thus we are tempted to ask about the effects of differences in provincial arrangements among separate schools, and about differences between public and separate schools. In this case we know how this came to be; the historical research is adequate. We know that a strong philosophical base supports and permeates the separate system. What are the impacts of these conditions on the bargaining process, of which the Church is a powerful new member? Is policy-making thus more elite, or more democratized because of shared values? Is innovation faster or slower? Shallow, or more thorough? How do the traditional organizational roles change? The separate systems exist primarily as socialization instruments — what successes and failures have emerged? Are there replicable differences between public and separate systems in their impact on pupils? Is there a danger of dissolving the existing system in favour of a split on English-French grounds? Many fear this (Stapleton, 1978). Because the historic and philosophic base is already so rich here, both broad and deep, quantitative and subjectivist descriptive research could be very productive.

The tenth topic is *the local school board*, another of the stronger areas in Canadian research. What follows is a montage of ideas. Given the conservative, acquiescing nature of school boards in Canada (Williams, 1977), what historical events have led to this? What values are included in this culture? What causes and characteristics differ from their U.S. counterparts? Is the professional culture diverging from the “cultural system in which most parents live” (Walker, 1978)? To which are elected boards attuned? Will the predicted conflict for scarce resources associated with decline lead to new processes and new structures of local representation? As urban areas decline schools close, accelerating deterioration (Walker, 1978); are there ideologies other than allegiance to short term cost-benefit reports, then, that should be operative? We have strong institutional and some behavioural research in these areas. I would advocate both “ends” of the continuum: long, deep, rich participant-observer studies, cross-validating comparative quantitative studies of large and diverse samples.

The eleventh topic is again a special case of its predecessor. The politics of education in Canada's *major cities*, especially Toronto and Montreal, are easily as complex as in many U.S. counterparts. Each city has specific minority and language issues, a polyglot constituency, declining enrolment and support, conflict between elite and new interest groups, ongoing feuds with the central education agency, highly politicized elections, considerable media attention... and all the other huge but fascinating problems. How do these similar boards deal with similar problems? Schwartz (1978) suggests that Vancouver's at-large election system causes different behaviours from those of Toronto's ward system. Do other cities deal with community input in the way Lucas and Lusthaus (1977) have described in Montreal? Do radical single-issue groups persist and mature as Pross (1975) suggests is com-

mon? Or do they remain small and deviant as the communist groups in Toronto studied by O'Toole (1977)? Is the balance of power shifting between the bureaucratic elite, the board, and interest groups? What are the special political issues which come with the two-tier system in Toronto and Montreal, where a "metro"-level school board oversees budgets for several constituent boards? We have lucid and insightful journalistic studies of some of these questions (Lind, 1974; Lorimer, 1970) but we have no scholarly work on the level of Peterson's (1976) description of the Chicago school board.

Twelve is a call for research and scholarship in the literal sense. The issue is *the philosophical base* of educational decisions. In the space of a week I have run into three references each arguing, convincingly, that the technological imperative will change the future so thoroughly that our institutions will become inadequate. Wolin (1972) argues that future schools should be "counter political," to compete with the destructive forces incipient in future technology. Williamson (1977), a science-fiction writer, fears the same future and the necessary emergence of a planetary culture, the concurrent submergence of individuality. *Time* magazine (Feb. 19, 1978) mostly hails the new utopia based on microprocessing of information, but it too has reservations. What kind of values are we carrying with us into that future? I want us to speculate, as observers of educational and political processes, about what values and ideologies we *should* carry into that future. I am not inspired by the prospect of future decision-making based on benefit-cost ratios established according to measurable variables. The politics of education — the politics of mankind — must ask whether there are any absolutes. There are two roles for our field here. One, we can identify and document the nature and the role of the prevailing political ideologies in our culture. This task lies within the scope of behavioural methods. Two, we can examine and evaluate these "ought" statements. We can consider both the implications and the internal consistency of prevailing ideologies. The research vehicles for this task lie within the realms of epistemology and political philosophy. This is the last, the least political, and probably the most difficult of the many research tasks which challenge us.

NOTE

Several ideas discussed here were anticipated by a single earlier work. Thus this general acknowledgement is appropriate to Laurence Iannaccone and Peter Cistone, authors of *The Politics of Education* (Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1974, chapter 8).

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