REVISTA ESPACIOS

Research of educational policies: science over ideology

Investigación de políticas educativas: ciencia sobre ideología

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ABSTRACT:

This article emphasizes that educational policies play an important role in structuring education as an educational system and therefore in its effectiveness. Educational policy research emerges as another essential issue in the improvement of education. The research of educational policies is discussed as another strategy to increase the scientific effectiveness of educational research. The thesis of this paper is that research of educational policies can allow science to displace the political ideology that characterizes the field of education.
Keywords: Educational policies, Scientific effectiveness, Political ideology, Educational policies research.

RESUMEN:

En este artículo se destaca que las políticas educativas desempeñan un importante papel en la estructuración de la educación como sistema educativo y, por ello, de su efectividad. La investigación sobre políticas educativas se convierte así en un tema esencial para la mejora de la educación. Resulta decisiva para aumentar la eficacia científica de la investigación educativa. El resultado principal ofrecido es que estas investigaciones pueden permitir que la ciencia desplace a la ideología política, tan presente hoy en educación.
Palabras clave: Políticas educativas, Eficacia científica, Ideología política, Investigación de políticas educativas.

1. Introduction

The call in the 21st century is to an education based on the results of educational research (Lysenko, Abrami, Bernand, Dagenais & Janosz, 2014; Snow, 2015; Ponce, 2016; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015; Gómez-Galán, 2016; Ponce, Pagán -Maldonado & Gómez-Galán, 2017; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2017). Educational research has a great opportunity to improve its scientific effectiveness if it directly links the generation of new knowledge of education with the utility of knowledge for the practice of the profession and the development of educational policies (Ranis, 2009; Vinovskies, 2009; Scheneider, 2014; Snow, 2015).

Given the political nature in the field of education, its practice needs to move to a science-

based one that helps to eradicate practices and educational models centered on partisan ideologies and politics. Linking research to the formulation of educational policies is an alternative to scientifically improving the field of education. In the 21st century, the study of educational policies emerges as a relevant subject of educational research because of its impact on the effectiveness of education systems. The problem with educational policies in many countries has been their fragmentation, their politicization, and their irrelevance and distance from educational practice (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2017; Woulfin, 2014; Pedró, 2015). Nor does there seem to be a clear link between policies and research, despite the pressures that exist for their study (Pacheco-Mendez, 2014; Hanusheck, 2015; Jennings, 2015; Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez-Galán, 2017, Ponce, Gómez Galán, & Pagán-Maldonado, 2017). Two objectives seem to dominate research on educational policies: to determine their effectiveness in improving education systems, and to formulate science-based educational policies that eradicate educational policies centered on ideologies (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2018; Woulfin, 2014). The expectation is that educational research will take a critical role and evaluate the scope of current educational policies (Smeyers & Dapaepe, 2008; Green, 2010; Koichiro, 2013; Ravitch, 2014; Hanusheck, 2015; Jennings, 2015). In a science-based educational model, it is necessary to understand how education policies work, not in terms of cause and effect relationships, but rather on how these policies influence student performance and the performance of their teachers (Smeyers & Dapaepe, 2008). It is necessary to understand how educational policies affect the contexts of the public schools where they are applied (Diko & Bantwini, 2013). There is a need to better understand the philosophical, moral, and evaluative aspects of educational policies and the behaviors they entail and which they wish to impose or eliminate (Gil-Cantero & Reyero, 2014). This paper examines the salient issues of educational policy research.

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2. Educational policies and scientific research

Educational policies are the ideal tool for government control (Pacheco-Méndez, 2014). As an administrative strategy, policies establish the order and the course of action that defines the functioning of educational systems in their managerial and academic management. Policies can define aspirations, behaviors, interventions, practices, dates of compliance, and accomplishments that are desired. Policies seek to establish best practices in education systems. Thus, international organizations such as UNESCO have tried to link scientific research with the development of policies to improve education. The objective of these institutional efforts has been to produce international, national and regional educational policies. Pacheco-Méndez (2014) suggests two points of analysis to examine the relationship between educational policies and educational research:

2.1. Policy design

Many elements can be included in the formulation of an educational policy, such as: (a) research that is considered as the scientific basis of the policy, (b) the intentions, the values, the ideals and the administrative and political aspirations that constitute the normative base that it is desired to reach on the part of those that write the policies (c) the events, circumstances or historical moments of the educational systems used as the context and the justification for writing the policy, (d) fiscal implications and implementation of the policy, and (e) the procedures to be followed in its implementation. Historically, in these elements is the success or failure of educational policies. For example, constituents' attitudes towards policies may vary if the drafting process is open and participatory to the school community or if the policy process is unilateral and imposed as an administrative decision. According to Pacheco-Méndez (2014), it is in this aspect that the discourses already made and the solutions exported to the problems of education abound. This is where the struggle and political control of education on the part of individuals or groups is evident.

2.2. The educational realities generated by policies

Policies constitute idealized educational conditions. Therefore, their implementation generates dynamics in educational systems, which can be positive or negative, because they have a direct or indirect impact on institutional practices, processes or the working conditions of their constituents. This affects the educational management that is pursued because it exalts or obscures administratively relegating it to second levels. The dominant practice in the design of educational policies has been the political ideology and the judgment of experts based on vertical institutional hierarchies. The critique of this model is to produce educational policies that are distant from the educational realities of the institutions they intend to lead and from the needs of their constituents. Policies are largely contextual because they seek to organize and direct educational institutions. At this point, research has focused its efforts. In a global society, it is up to the research community to deploy strategies, approaches and methodologies to expose the scope of educational policies (Pacheco-Méndez, 2014). The positioning seems to be to generate science-based educational policies that shift to ideological and political policies (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2017; Woulfin, 2014; Pedró, 2015: Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez-Galán, 2017).

3. Research on educational policies

Research on educational policies is neither a uniform nor unified field in purposes, nor in conceptual strategies nor in methodological strategies (Pacheco-Mendez, 2014). Two research models of educational policies are inferred in literature: research-evaluation of existing policies and the construction-validation of science-based policies:

3.1. Research-evaluation of existing policies

In this approach, the objective is the research-evaluation of the effectiveness of educational policies to produce the desired result. The researcher studies policies and tracks their impact on the education system or its constituents. At the end of the study, it makes recommendations for improvement in the event of determining that the policy is not effective. In this model, research is ex post facto (Woulfin, 2014; Pedró, 2015; Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2017).

3.2. Construction-validation of science-based policies

In this research approach, the objective is to develop and validate science-based educational policies that help to eradicate policies based on ideologies. The policy is constructed, its procedures and implementation protocols are developed, and tested to determine its effectiveness in producing the desired results. The expectation in this model is the experimental method to validate the policy. This approach emerged in the United States of America in the face of the disconnection between policies and the classroom (Woulfin, 2014; Pedró, 2015).

4. The challenges and issues of researching educational policies

The study of educational policies presents several challenges for educational researchers because it is an exercise that transcends the analysis of the content of the regulations to delve into identifying their impact on the effectiveness of the educational institution or society. This exercise entails the following considerations:

4.1. Conflicts of expectations and ideals

Policies are meeting points where political ideals, work responsibilities and managerial visions are collected on how education should be. Educational policies have been the most contentious area of political influences in the field of education (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2017; Woulfin, 2014; McDonnell, 2015; Pedró, 2015; Resnick, 2015). Policy

analysis can unleash conflicts of interest and expectations between what management aspires to or the political spheres, which are desired by the professional associations of educators and the research work to be done by researchers. This can be translated into a series of dynamics and attitudes that manifest in the before, during and after the study. For example, if the study is a top management assignment, the middle management overseeing the implementation of the policy can understand it as an audit of its work. This can be translated into attitudes of little collaboration with the researchers. Another example may be that the administrative expectation is to collect policy-specific data, and this is in contrast to the study design proposed by the researchers. The expectation of policy analysis studies is to produce improvement recommendations. The findings of the study can be criticized to the extent that its recommendations support or reject the ideologies of the various constituents of the school community. In summary, research on educational policies tends to be translated into political research environments (Barnett & Parry, 2014; Pacheco-Méndez, 2014).

4.2. Construction-validation of science-based policies

The effect of policies on the effectiveness of education can be seen in its direct and indirect impacts. The direct impact is the desired result that is pursued with the policy. The researcher identifies the ideal that promotes the normative and seeks the achievement prescribed in the manifestation of the operation of the school, the education system or the community. For example, the policy states that students will receive at least three hours of K-12 physical education per week, as long as fiscal resources allows. The spirit of the policy establishes three hours minimum of physical education a week and the evidence will consist of determining whether or not it complies with the regulations. Failure to comply with the regulations requires to identify the reasons for this and thus be able to determine its scope. The researcher can identify the administrative reasons for not fully complying with the policy and physical educators, professional groups or external health area groups criticize the educational priorities behind administrative decisions being made. The search for direct policy impacts is essentially a comparison between a "desired ideal" and the manifestation of that ideal achieved (Barnett & Parry, 2014). An indirect impact may be a side effect that was not anticipated or was not identified in the policy drafting. A large number of educational policies seek to improve education by establishing practices that must occur in the performance of teachers or principals. For example, a policy on student academic assessment might describe the assessment model to be followed, establish how many assessments should be generated for students during the semester, the dates for assessments, and how to discuss these with parents and students. The policy is clear in its intention of how the student evaluation process has to occur. For the implementation of the policy, teachers were trained. When the researcher analyzes the implementation of the policy, it identifies that the new responsibilities of evaluation of the learning in which the teachers have to incur, adds itself to a loaded agenda of other responsibilities that make the working conditions extremely difficult. The director presses for compliance with policy dates, but the impact of the policy on teachers who implement it translates to overwhelming work when added to other teaching tasks. There are educational policies whose scientific basis is unquestionable. However, the responsibilities that add up to its constituents can trigger other dynamics not contemplated.

The process of tracking the impact of policies can expose researchers to political and ethical dynamics that require tact, respect, and ongoing dialogue with study participants. An example of a dynamic product of the policy may be that managers feel that the researcher will be evaluating their work because they are responsible for compliance with the policy. The administrator may not be very cooperative with the investigator. Likewise, if the study involves interviewing teachers, it may be that they are not very cooperative either for fear of reprisals. Another example may be that participants intend to use the researcher as the spokesperson for their discomfort (Barnett & Parry, 2014). In short, investigating the impact of educational policies entails the challenge of tracking their effects on the educational system and its constituents, but also dealing with the mood states of the participants. The combination of these factors makes policy research a complex task.

4.3. Understand the educational contexts that the policy intends to manage

Educational policies are not mere regulations. They are guides that are oriented to structure, to harmonize and to facilitate the operation of the educational systems and their schools. Conducting a responsible analysis of educational policies does not only mean understanding the intent of the regulations and looking for compliance. It implies understanding the educational contexts where the policies are applied in order to be able to appreciate their scope, their impact and their ecological validity. For example, let's say that an academic program evaluation policy can define the type of assessment to be done, and prescribes the role and participation of teachers and management in this process. The scientific basis for program evaluation on which the policy is based is recognized in the academic world. However, the implementation of the evaluation model in the realities of the schools of the system to which it is directed entails the creation of diverse committees of teachers to generate the data and to discuss them. This procedure can work very well in a school with many teachers and not in a school with few teachers because the work is unmanageable. The procedure of the policy is not consonant with the reality of the school. The analysis of policies entails this degree of understanding of the educational scenarios in order to appreciate the scope of the same and to generate recommendations that really respond to the ecology of the schools or the system.

4.4. Research methodologies

Investigating the impact of a policy on teachers, administrators, students, or the community may involve the use of various techniques and various approaches to data collection. Generally, researchers have to operate on several conceptual levels that entail a policy and this demands the use of multiple approaches (Barnett & Parry, 2014):

Conceptual level 1. Consists of the idea or the spirit of the policy. This level may involve analysis of the content of the policy or interviews with the authors.

Conceptual level 2. Is based on the implementation procedures of the policy. This approach may require field visits to analyze what is involved in implementing the policy in administrative and teaching terms. It may require interviewing the protagonists of the implementation or field observations.

Conceptual level 3. Takes into account the historical context of educational policy or the social, economic or political conditions of the educational system or the country that the regulations are based on. It may involve the analysis of institutional documents to determine whether the historical conditions are the same or changed.

Conceptual level 4. Is based on the identification of the impacts or the positive or negative changes that occurred with the implementation of the policy. It may involve several approaches to identify the impact and to measure it.

Conceptual level 5. Is built on attitudes and opinions towards the policy. This approach may involve administering questionnaires to the various constituents to measure attitudes.

The success of educational policy research entails several philosophical and methodological considerations: (a) an inquiring mindset to question and understand what knowledge and what evidence is needed to determine the scope and impact of policies, (b) the possibility of having to resort to various techniques and various approaches to data collection, (c) the mental and methodological flexibility to move inquisitively at all conceptual levels implied by an educational policy. When research has to be flexible, the rigor of methods should not be confused with inflexible methods (Greig, Taylor & Mackay, 2007).

4.5. Evidence

To argue that what will be sought to determine the impact of a policy on the education system seems a common assertion of educational research. However, there are educational

policies that are based on ideals and aspirations that are intangible, difficult to measure, describe or evidence, but that affect public opinion. For example, we will reduce school dropout rates by 10%, we will offer quality education or education for all. Collecting evidence or data that show the impact of policies is not always translated into the exercise of presenting statistics or success stories because the possible answers escape science to enter into the world of philosophy and morals (Gil-Cantero & Reyero, 2014). The researcher has to navigate between the ideal of policies and the pragmatic practical solutions that could serve them (Barnett & Parry, 2014). Therefore, no data or statistics should be interpreted outside the evaluation of reason, logic, context of educational norms (Koichiro, 2013) or the objectives of education (Pring, 2007). Policy research exposes researchers to the following dynamics and realities that may raise questions about the validity of the information generated (Barnett & Parry, 2014); (a) formulate recommendations with fragile evidence or formulate recommendations in light of the discrepancies between what is aspired and what is being focused; (b) to negotiate access to information with individuals or groups; (b) confusion of data because the policies may have been misinterpreted or distorted in its implementation and that places researchers in the role of understanding and clarifying the information.

5. Conclusions

The influence of partisan politics in education is observed in the educational policies they impose (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2017; Woulfin, 2014; Pedró, 2015). Research of educational policies is considered a way to improve education because of the possibility of having scientifically based educational policies that help to minimize the political ideology that enters the educational systems (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado & Gómez Galán, 2018; Woulfin, 2014).

Research and evaluation of educational policies is a growing need at the beginning of the 21st century (Lysenko, Abrami, Bernand, Dagenais & Janosz, 2014; Snow, 2015; Ponce, 2016; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015; Ponce, Pagán -Maldonado & Gómez-Galán, 2017; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2017). Research of educational policies is considered a challenge due to its complexity, the realities that they impose and try to create in educational systems, for the unanticipated effects that can be generated in the morals of the constituents of the educational systems. Finally, but not less important, for the repertoire and the methodological flexibility they entail in order to track the impact they have.

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