

## **What counts as meaningful and worthwhile educational policy analysis?**

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*Abstract:* The paper considers what counts as meaningful and worthwhile education policy analysis. We propose that qualitative analyses of the social historiographies of nation states' educational policies are important because mapping the complex histories of each nation state addresses the questions of 'how' and 'why' these education policies developed as they did. We suggest that using qualitative policy analyses reveals the extent to which education policy as text and discourse facilitates community engagement and participation, the management of economic transitions and economic growth within sustainable ethical frameworks, and tolerance for cultural diversity. Disseminating such policy learning is important so that nation states might learn from each other and develop global competences. Reading nation states' education policy through Hodgson and Spours (2006) policy analysis framework may reveal particular eras in education systems and processes. Further such researches may illuminate commonalities and differences in nation states' education policy as text and discourse. We argue such policy analyses are required to make a new contribution to knowledge with a sharp focus on policy learning to improve approaches to and engagement with education policy, agency and globalization.

*Keywords:* critical qualitative analyses, social historiographies, policy research for policy learning, globalization and agency

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to consider what counts as meaningful and worthwhile educational policy analysis. To address this aim requires careful thought about why it is important to examine education policy, what counts as meaningful and worthwhile policy analysis and the benefits of such studies. We begin by examining why educational policy needs to be understood in terms of how the historiography of educational policy has shaped educational policy of the present. Second we examine policy in a global context and reveal how issues of power need to be considered when engaging with policy analysis. Finally we examine possible relationships between the local and particular education policy of a region, or a nation state with regard to policy, agency and globalization.

## **Significance of the paper**

We believe that this paper is important because it calls for the collection and theorising of educational policy development through a lens of social historiography (Gale, 2001). Social historiography enables the researcher to analyse policy documents to discover: “the processes of educational change and expose the possible relationships between the socio-educational present and the socio-educational past” (Kincheloe, 1991: 234). Gale argues that to do this requires a systematic and rigorous engagement with the materials from the past to reveal historical stages (Gale, 2001). Gale further argues that social historiography may take a critical approach and reveal public issues and private troubles. Using Gale’s (2001) approach the data analysed are usually documentary and can include primary sources, government documents, researches, and media releases. Secondary sources such as academic literature and newspaper articles may also be drawn upon (Simon, 1991). The main, educational research that compares education systems draws on quantitative analyses provided by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that examine the outcomes of nation states education systems and address the ‘what’ questions. What this paper is arguing for is the need for an

analysis of social historiographies of different nation states that have very different social histories and education systems underpinned by different ideologies. To do this we argue there is a need to use qualitative analyses that provide rich description and address the important 'how' questions regarding education policy analyses to inform future educational policy and the potential development of global competences.

This paper therefore examines the potential benefits and challenges of bringing together a collection of social historiographies of different nation states with a sharp focus on education policies and education systems. To do this we ask three questions. First, to what extent is a qualitative analysis of the social historiographies of nation states' educational policies important? Second, to what extent is examining nation states' educational policies as text and policy as discourse within a global discourse important? Finally to what extent are there possible relationships between different nation state's educational policy development, policy as text and policy as discourse?

### **Education Policy: The importance of Social historiographies, meaning and context**

Education policy is arguably a future roadmap of a nation for provision of resources in an education sector. However, where an education state is going and where it is now, is informed by where it has come from. Therefore mapping shifts in educational policy has the potential to reveal economic policies and how these were coupled to the social and moral values according to the cultural aspirations of the region at the time. Stasz and Wright (2007) make a case that policies are designed in a political environment, and shaped by ideology, interests of particular groups, constituent pressures and a variety of fiscal and institutional constraints. Decisions in policy making may be reached through compromises that ensure legislative commitments are met, whilst meeting the demands of other policy areas because resources, and funding in these matters are finite. Rust (2004) suggests that education policy specialists concentrate on policies related to education and endeavour to ensure that education occurs in the public interest. He further extended that education

policy studies is somewhat marginal as an academic field, though in recent years it has made strides towards legitimacy. Ball (2006) states one of the conceptual problems of policy research is a failure of policy analysts to define what is meant by policy. Further, policies can be encoded in complex ways. Codd (1998) argues that policy is perpetually in a state of becoming and is therefore difficult to capture and analyse. Policies may be in states of 'was', 'never was' and 'not quite', and for any text a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings. Moreover, policies shift and change their meaning in the arenas of politics where representations change and key interpreters such as secretaries of state, ministers and chairs of councils change. It is also possible that key actors change as a deliberate tactic for changing the meaning of policy. Bangs *et al.* (2011) address this issue when they cite Conor Ryan:

The big problem you've got is the lack of continuity...there's a curious thing that happens with all the policy people of the department...the ones who are really good quickly get moved on...so you lose that memory, so you get someone else who's on a learning curve and may or may not be any good at it...the ones who are plodding stay there (p. 154).

The impact of memory loss on the coherence of policy development is significant because policies structure ways in which a community goes about its busy-ness. Therefore policies and the way in which they are interpreted and mediated shape identities. Struggles also occur over the interpretation and enactment of policies. These shifts may operate within a moving discursive frame which articulates and constrains the possibilities of interpretation and enactment. Where there is stability one policy builds on another and the lessons learned from before inform the changes, if any, to future policy. However, Hodgson and Spours (2006) argue that policy is not grounded on what has gone before and 'policy amnesia' exists. Their framework (fig. 1) includes the historical and wider context that the education policy is located within when analysing education policy and policy making. Using such a framework may illuminate the extent to which time is given to the critical reflection needed before any new policy is introduced. Such critical reflection is facilitated by an

analysis of the qualitative data gathered as part of a social historiography. Critical reflection may reveal policy strengths and areas for development which may at the same time affirm and subvert policy in a constructive way to bring about coherence and improvement in delivery or provision. Critical reflection that only reveals the strengths of an educational policy and ignores the problems is not going to be in the public interest or for the public good. Providing space and time for those who will be affected by the policy to associate with its construction (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2003) slows shifts in policy and enables them to be guided by wisdom. This is in sharp contrast to policy shifts that swing from one ideology to another, that do not build on what has gone before, and therefore lose the chance to learn from past successes and failures. Indeed Stasz and Wright (2007) argue that policies fail for three reasons.

First, they are not evidence informed. Second, they are shaped by deeply held beliefs. Third, there is poor alignment between the policy problem and a particular policy instrument with a short time frame such as an inducement. An instrument with a longer time-frame may be preferred however such an instrument may be more expensive, less visible, and the benefits may not be realized until some time in the future possibly after the next government election. Such an investment for the public good is therefore risky for a government because they will be funding a worthwhile project that the voting public will not see the benefits of before the next election which may lose them votes at the next election. Indeed if another government were elected that incoming government would reap the kudos that belonged to the noble policies of the previous government. Education policies are therefore hermeneutically situated or in other words situated within a given context with a particular social history that is political (Hodgson and Spours, 2006). Potentially education policies are at best subject to serendipity and at worst power-plays by interested parties. However, governments are potentially positioned to act fast when developing and implementing education policy because they need to win votes and be re-elected. Therefore serving communities may be based on short-term instruments that deliver quick wins. Such instruments do not have the opportunity for what Wei *et al.* (2009) call capacity building strategies that develop initiatives slowly and reflectively leading to longer term success.

Rather short-term instruments may be driven through without the time and space for considered discussion and engagement with the new initiatives by all involved. With a change in Government may come a change in education policies underpinned by different ideologies. The strengths of education policies from previous governments may be abandoned and forgotten leaving the educational professionals to make sense of how their professional practice aligns with what they have done before and what they are required to do now.

Saran (1973) questions the role political parties take in the process of change, and suggests there needs to be further research into this and into the relationship between local politicians, their professional advisers and local pressure groups of various kinds. As Ball (2006) suggests the advocates and technicians of policy change may find themselves the beneficiaries of new power relations. The argument is therefore presented that unless education policy is discursive, the possibilities for thinking 'otherwise' with an enquiring mind are limited. Further the chances for building coherent education policies that build on what worked before and transparently challenge what did not work are limited. Thus, educational policy and its implications need to be understood by all affected by it, in a language that is understood by all, and progressed in forums that are committed to facilitating civic engagement where participation is facilitated (Shields, 2007).

Moreover, those involved with educational policy for the public good need to have informed opinion and Saran (1973) states: decisions about changes in policy and in administrative practice are closely related to changes in informed opinion. Indeed, these two factors reinforce each other (p. 274).

Education policy as a public good is also associated with individuals' rights. Article 26 states the provision of education is a basic human right (Universal declaration of Human Rights, 1948). The justice and equality for the delivery or provision of this right is in the hands of each nation state's governing systems. However, Barry (1990) suggests that in a complex society there are a variety of values and demands for social policy. It is therefore challenging to rank the elements of social policy of which education is a contender. Individuals require public institutions for the delivery of public welfare, yet there are issues that arise with regard to justice and equality. Taysum and Gunter (2008) rehearsed Fraser's (1997) insightful treatment of the kinds of

issues that emerge from estranging justice from the politics of distribution, or equality. Policies form identities, and therefore the ways in which policies and their underlying ideologies consider the justice and politics of distribution is important. When identities are formed the need for distribution within economically defined classes is frequently set against a justice of recognition of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2000). Warnock (2006) argued that historically it has always been a matter of extreme difficulty to separate the two notions of equality and justice. Clearly the implementation of potential global competences set out in documents such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights are problematic to implement in nation states as the rules of each nation state are rooted in their complex histories, economic capital, cultural capital, values, and religions. Further, to try to bring nation states together in academic research that focuses on qualitative data, disseminated through academic is challenging. This is because journal articles require a sharp focus and the scope for comparing many countries' educational policy is limited to statistical reportage in this kind of forum. Quantitative data does provide knowledge on 'what is happening' in a snap shot view as can be found with PISA, but does not provide knowledge regarding 'how this was achieved'. Therefore this paper suggests a new way of approaching and engaging with education policy is required that recognizes mixed methods and uses both quantitative data and qualitative data but distinctively enables collaborative research to occur between many nation-states and regions. The new way of approaching and engaging with education policy focuses on mapping the complex histories of each nation state and focuses on qualitative data to address the questions of 'how' and 'why' these education policies developed as they did. Disseminating such policy learning as found in this special edition of the Italian Journal of the Sociology of Education, is important so that others might learn from decision making, and consequences for particular nation states' education systems. This is particularly significant if the potential for evidence informed policy is to play a greater role in policy formation (Pring, and Thomas, 2008). It is worthy of note that such analyses have to be represented with caution to the reader because when mapping back from the present to the past the eras that appear to emerge can seem linear and deterministic. In reality as the social history and educational policies unfolded

in real time the process was messy with social actors competing for power and ultimately for their agendas to be implemented. Readers of policy research need to be mindful of such complexities when considering education policy and agency within a context of globalization.

### **Policy in Global context**

The world might be perceived as globally networked where no country can live in isolation as countries are linked with each other through international forums, institutions, and agencies such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Cultural Industries Development Agency (CIDA) and Department For International Development (DIFD) which provide assistance for policy guidelines and capacity building of manpower especially in developing countries. These organisations conduct research studies in different countries within a global context because education is potentially an important tool for the development of a global community. Green *et al.* (2007), revealed from their policy studies of East Asia, China, India, Kenya and Sri Lanka, education is an important factor for achieving success within a context of Globalisation with regard to economic growth combined with equality and peace. However education was not necessarily the main factor in each case, and there was no apparent quick fix solution that could be dropped on a particular education system where the impact would be an improvement to that system. With respect to the recent past and present the five policies did reveal some generic and potentially core criteria that may be of interest to those seeking notions of global competences for educational policy. The first is inclusion in its simplest form where education policy achieves high quality mass education. Such inclusion brings all marginalized and rural populations within mainstream educational provision influencing national development. The second is the planned expansion of secondary education, technical, further and higher education within a framework of life-long learning that creates the skills needed for sustained economic growth. The third is the development of communication skills that facilitate international economic transitions. By economic transitions we refer



to developing systemic ways of living together using limited resources within a shared ethical framework of economic standards that include respect for and tolerance of cultural diversity that include issues of sufficiency and well-being (Unicef, 2007; Mander, 2007). The fourth is the equitable expansion of education in order to enhance its contribution to social equality and social justice. The fifth is the awareness of the potential of both the official and hidden curriculum of education institutions to promote positive contributions to national unity and social cohesion (Green *et al.*, 2007). Further Green *et al.* (2007) found globalisation is a process that occurs simultaneously at national and supra-national levels. In context the international agencies and agreements made recognize the unique national and local histories, values and aspirations found in each particular region. In securing the most favourable terms of engagement with a global economy that embraces justice coupled with equity, education plays a vital role to secure the most productive relationships between international, national and local resources for development. The kinds of agreements made at global levels for economic policies, are made by decision makers whose identities have been formed by education systems (Taysum, 2010). Therefore the kinds of negotiations that take place towards securing a sustainable global community are dependent on the education systems that form identities. The relationship between the knowledge, skills and experience of the decision makers influencing education policy is therefore potentially dependent on the education system that formed their identity. Moreover, as article 26 (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) identifies, education beyond the 'early years' may be built on 'merit'. Such meritocracy is dependent on identifying those of merit. Taysum and Gunter (2008) identify that the criteria for identifying merit is dependent on cultural capital and equal access to the curriculum.

Taysum (2006) argues that the elite are positioned to make decisions about education policies and education systems that continue to serve the elite. Such decision makers Bottery (2000) suggests are influenced by demography, the economic and cultural capital of a nation state or region, the role of the welfare state, and the power that they have with regard to the centralisation of policy control juxtaposed with the decentralisation of implementation. Bottery (2000) also suggests that the position of the region within the global community is also

significant with regard to the power they have to influence the value systems and decision making of the players on the international stage. Olssen et al (2004) extend this idea by identifying that globalization brings an urgency to the need for a new world order in which nation-states can develop policies that will contribute to sustainable forms of international governance. This is important if education policies are central to such a global mission.

Resnik (2007) discussed the findings of her research that only since the 1990s has the impact of globalization on education drawn scholarly attention, primarily due to the impact of international school achievement surveys and instruments such as PISA. This study argues that the globalization of education began much earlier, with the establishment of intergovernmental agencies, such as UNESCO and OECD, and the adoption of American educational models after the Second World War. The analysis of reforms in the education systems of France and Israel after the Second World War shows how the diffusion of global educational models that stress equality of opportunity enhanced local transformations and affected national policies. Such an analysis elaborates the process whereby knowledge producers, linked to global networks, understood 'social problems' according to the education knowledge production shaped by education systems in a particular region. In France and Israel alliances with highly ranked 'functionaries' influenced socio-political conditions brought about through structural reforms aimed at the 'democratization of education'.

Stevenson and Bell (2006) argue that education policy is both recognizing the socio-political arenas beyond the state of education, and the capacity to shift values into what people do in their communities of practice at a local level. In education, across phases and across the globe, policy context shape nation states' education systems and processes. This may take a potentially reductionist and technocratic approach with a preferred way to deliver education policy to attain particular outcomes. Aims may be determined by dominant discourses and Thrupp and Willmott (2003) argue that the state of education may be influenced by forces beyond the scope of education. One of the issues here is that education policy may be treated uncritically, values overlooked, and the moral purpose of education might be left to the agency of individuals (Taysum and Gunter, 2008). Few political spaces may exist for policy as text to be interpreted through policy as discourse (Ball, 2006).

Taysum (2007b) argues that postgraduate research may be a space for engaging critically with educational policy using different epistemological approaches. Taysum (2010) draws on Gunter's 2005 framework of knowledge and knowing to explore how different epistemological approaches to analyzing policy may reveal different ways to connect with a particular education policy. For example policy may be analysed by thinking through how it delivered change through instrumental strategies, or evaluations may be carried out to measure impact. An alternative approach may be to engage critically with the policy to reveal the relationship the policy has with economic and social justice within societies, or examining the values and value conflicts that may exist within the policy. The policy analysis may take a humanistic approach by collecting and using experiences to inform and enhance practice. Alternatively the policy may be analysed to conceptualise the policy. To do this the policy needs to be described and the practice that unfolds through social history needs to be challenged. The articles in this special edition do describe educational policy in their nation states from 1944 to the current day. The rich qualitative description of particular eras using Gale (2001) and Hodgson and Spours (2006) is important and it is from such descriptions that the conceptualisations of education policies can be presented, critiqued and values and value conflicts revealed.

### **Analysing policy commonalities and differences**

The underpinning epistemology of policies and their ideologies need to be unpacked to begin to understand policy as text. Further the underpinning epistemology of the policy research also needs to be unpacked to shed light on education policy. To do this policies and the shifts in policies need to be identified. It is also necessary to classify the extent to which the policies build upon one another, overlap, or whether they appear to contradict one another. Conceptualising policy in this way means it is necessary to think through issues of power, and the balance of power in terms of making sense of policy 'from above' and 'below' (Taysum and Gunter, 2008).

Dowding (1996) suggests: "power to" can be described as outcome power

which “is the ability of an actor to bring about or help to bring about outcomes” (1996, p. 5). Power to may involve cooperation and power over seems to involve conflict (Dowding, 1996). Change has the potential to undermine existing practices and common sense views. Values may be challenged and this is not neutral since there will be winners and losers. The notion of power balance and the underlying ideological position of the political arena at any given time needs to be unravelled when trying to understand the production of policy text and its subsequent interpretation through practice.

### **Revealing possible patterns between different nation states’ educational policy development**

The elements of the policy as product are explored in a dimension of Hodgson and Spours (2006) analytical framework for policy engagement (p. 685) (fig. 1) through ‘political eras’.

Hodgson and Spours (2006) propose that using their framework enables political eras or shifts in policy over time to be examined. Such analysis makes it possible to reveal the extent to which “policy memory” exists over political eras, or the extent to which political cycles present barriers to coherence between policies. Hodgson and Spours (2006) present three key areas of political era as societal and historical meanings, contexts and movements, hegemony, and national and international debates in education. Resnik (2007) affirms the need to consider global networks in education debates when considering policy. Resnik argues such discourses are essential to understanding policy shifts at national level and argues that The American School Model influenced policy development in many countries, with a sharp focus on structural reform in Israel from 1968.

Ainley (2004) suggests that the education state might be seen in England as being influenced by the pre-Second World War capitalist state, moving to a welfare state established by the 1944 Education Act to a current market state from 1988 to the present.

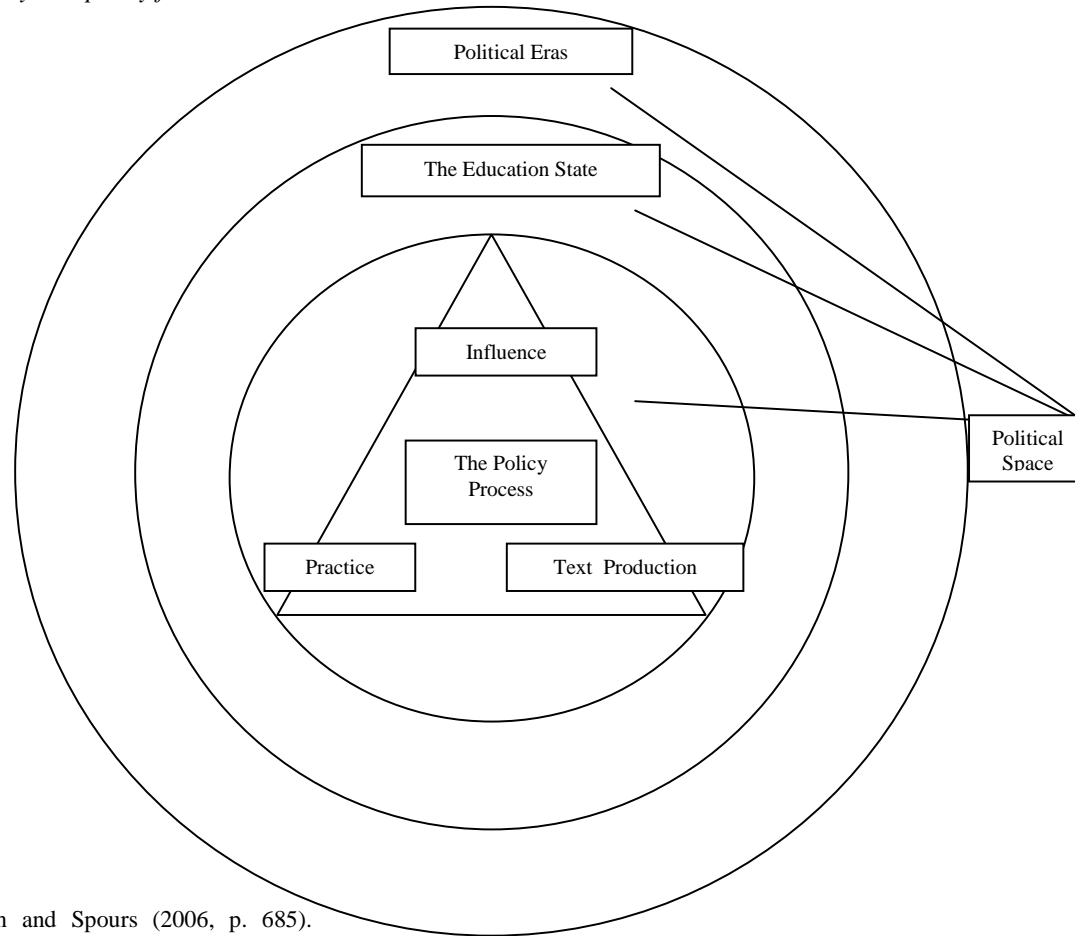
Hodgson and Spours (2006) affirm this: “we feel reasonably confident, therefore, in talking about a single political era from the late 1980s to the

present” (p. 685). Engagement with policy leads on to the second of Hodgson and Spours (2006) framework which is the education state comprising of:

a range of national, regional and local structures and institutions, including the No. 10 Policy Unit, DFES, the regulatory and awarding bodies, inspectorates, funding bodies, and Government institutions and quangos and tries to capture the significant role of a set of key players within the contexted landscape of educational policy (p. 687).

The third dimension of the framework is the policy process which tries to understand policy formation from beginning to end revealing the power differentials, the source of conflict, and innovations and how policy as text is realised. The triangle at the centre shows the movements that occur during the policy process. The fourth dimension is the political space that can be non-deterministic (Taysum, 2007b) or deterministic. The framework provides opportunities for collecting both quantitative data and qualitative data to address the ‘what’ questions along with the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions regarding the description of education policy and how and why it came about. Such analyses offer opportunities for building policy as text and policy as discourse for high quality evidence informed education processes and systems within a global context. Policy research of this kind may offer the chance to develop global competences within shared ethical frameworks that promote economic sufficiency and cultural well-being.

Figure 1. An analytical policy framework



Source: Hodgson and Spours (2006, p. 685).

## **Conclusions**

We argue in this paper that qualitative analyses of the social historiographies of nation states' educational policies are important because mapping the complex histories of each nation state addresses the questions of 'how' and 'why' these education policies developed as they did. This moves beyond the quantitative analyses provided by PISA which are important but leave unanswered questions such as why is it important for a nation state to compare its educational outcomes and how do such analyses address questions about the ways in which education facilitates community engagement and participation, the management of economic transitions and economic growth within sustainable ethical frameworks, and tolerance for cultural diversity. We argue that engaging with the what, how and why questions or using mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative analyses has the potential to lead to real policy learning. Disseminating such policy learning is important so that nation states might learn from each other. This is particularly significant if the potential for evidence informed policy is to play a greater role in policy formation (Pring and Thomas, 2008). Secondly we argue that examining nation states' educational policies as text and policy as discourse using qualitative and quantitative methods within a global discourse is important. The rationale for this is that policy analysis of this kind can reveal social histories, and significant social actors of different nation states who shaped particular social histories and education policies. Finally we argued that identifying possible relationships between regional, national and global educational policy development, policy as text and policy as discourse can help to generate new understandings about education policy, agency and globalization with a view to shedding light on future education policy development. Core criteria may be identified as generic and help those seeking notions of global competences for educational policy. Such core criteria may be the extent to which education systems provide high quality mass education, develop education systems to influence national development, develop communication skills required for international economic transitions, develop social equality and social justice and develop awareness of the overt and covert curriculum of education institutions to facilitate civic engagement, tolerance and social cohesion. We

have identified that taking Gale's (2001) socio-historiographical approach to policy analyses enables the exposition of potential relationships between the socio-educational present and the socio-educational past by systematically and rigorously engaging with the materials from the past. Historical stages may be revealed and a critical engagement with these stages may produce new knowledge about the public issues and private troubles. Gale further argues that social historiography may take a critical approach and reveal public issues and private troubles. We then build on Gale's arguments by drawing on Hodgson and Spours (2006) analytical policy framework that systematically examines political eras, the education state, policy as text, practice, the policy process and influence. However, Hodgson and Spours argue that their framework needs further testing. We are calling for qualitative policy research into nation states' policy analysis using Hodgson and Spours framework within a social historiographical policy analysis approach. Researches of this kind, particularly from a significant starting point in time for all nations such as the end of World War II, may reveal how nations with apparently opposing economic and cultural structures have developed their education systems and processes over time within particular eras. We argue such policy analyses are required to make a new contribution to knowledge with a sharp focus on policy learning for improved approaches to and engagement with education policy, agency and globalization.

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