

Chinese Educational Policy Research: The Arduous Formation of a Research Paradigm

ECNU Review of Education
2019, Vol. 2(4) 544–560
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DOI: 10.1177/2096531119887646
journals.sagepub.com/home/roe



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Abstract

Purpose: Through combing the 40 years' history of the development of Chinese educational policy research, this article attempts to sort out the efforts and lessons learned by researchers in the field of education policy in China.

Design/Approach/Methods: As one of the earliest scholars engaged in the study of Chinese education policy, based on the academic publications, symposia, and thematic research, the author has found efforts in four directions in the field: proposals for policy-oriented research and research-oriented policy, disciplinization-based endeavors, empirical research on theory-guided educational policy, and guidance on major educational policy research topics and a think tank for educational policy decisions.

Findings: This article argues that there is now a correspondence among the ideas, themes, forms, and frameworks of the educational reform promulgated by the government in recent years that have appeared in educational policy research, but there is no clear demarcation of what makes an educational policy researcher; no stable academic community has been formed that might strive together toward the foundation of a disciplinary paradigm, the rational organization of academic ideas, and the establishment and handing over of a theoretical framework to a succeeding generation.

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Originality/Value: This article takes a step back to claim that a paradigm for Chinese educational policy research is still nascent in the arduous process of formulation.

Keywords

China, disciplinization, educational policy research, paradigm, theoretical guidance, think tank

Date received: 12 January 2019; accepted: 17 October 2019

Chinese educational policy research in the 40 years since Reform and Opening-Up may be examined in two periods: the first 20 years and the latter 20 years. In the first 20 years, a host of articles were published dealing with promulgation of the new policy, general policy suggestions, and retrospectives of policy studies; innovative theoretical framework construction or actual research on policy phenomena were rare. In the latter 20 years, however, educational policy research has gradually become a hot educational research topic. Internationally, educational policy research has been developing very quickly as a new field of educational research since the 1980s, becoming the most prominent component of international education research and the focal point generating the most attention.

This phenomenon is not unique to education. It is a reflection on the entire social discipline of where social science applications are heading. Since the 1980s, an integrated discipline has been developing with unusual alacrity: public policy . . . Strictly speaking, this is not really a course of study so much as it is a developmental trend which almost all social sciences are exhibiting, an applicable shift in emphasis from theoretical speculation on the ‘What is it?’ to the ‘How is it done?’ Internationally, prominent researchers in every discipline now almost all participate in policy research pertaining to those disciplines. In both theory and practice, the most influential research findings have nearly all been related to policy. (Yuan, 2000, pp. 1–2)

It is precisely with this understanding, together with the development toward an empirical and experiential orientation in education research, that educational policy research has asserted the need to utilize first-hand experience, collect empirical data, construct logical evidence chains, and draw clear conclusions that can be made into policy suggestions or that have policy implications, all of these forming an essential component of educational policy research and a new paradigm of empirical orientation in educational policy research that has begun to spring up with the criticism of analytical and commentary policy research. Around the year 2000, China published a number of textbooks and monographs all identically titled *Educational Policy Studies*, but the research topics mentioned in these works do not today seem to have developed into individual branches of academic study. As the government has introduced all manner of education reforms, almost none concerning educational policy research in the field of academia have crossed the threshold. Among more and

more keyword lists and “research interests” presented in theses and curriculum vitae from educational researchers, the word “policy” has appeared with increasing frequency. This has caused “educational policy research” to seem even more like a chance result of changes in educational practice, rather than a natural evolutionary development in the course of academic or disciplinary progress, and it is difficult to frame it as an independent and serious theme for research.

Thus, this essay intends to clarify, organize, and summarize the relationships that have been established between the ideas, themes, and methods that appear in all manner of educational policy research and the various forms and styles of educational reform that have been promulgated in our time.

Calling for policy-oriented research and research-oriented policy

In the past 20 years, works in China dealing with educational policy have been mostly compilations of policy documents intended for the use of researchers in various fields studying historical evidence of the administration of education by the government of a particular time period, for instance, the *Anthology of Laws and Decrees on Primary and Secondary Education Policy (1949–1966)* put out by Institute of Educational Science Research of Beijing Normal University, the *Anthology of Foundational Laws on Foreign Education* from the State Council’s Office for Research and Discussion of Educational Affairs, or *Key Studies on Education Policies and Regulations* from the Shaanxi Primary School Principal Training and Continuing Education series, as well as some practical works discussing education policy regulations in other countries. The research literature on educational policy from this period in China’s history was still made from a perspective within government administration, with the intent being to increase the quality and efficiency of key policies. In 1996, Yuan published *Educational Policy Studies*, systematically transplanting and recommending theories and patterns in the field of public policy, and categorizing the policy process into formulation, implementation, and evaluation stages, individually categorizing and introducing mid-level and microlevel concepts and theories. In subsequent editions, the author intentionally introduces policy research methods such as ethnographical discussions and investigations of the relationship between researchers and policy makers and asserts that both sides have a need to mingle and communicate (Yuan, 1996). Following this path, Yuan in 2000 published a book called *On Changes of Chinese Educational Policy: A Case Study on the Relationship between Equality and Benefit in Key Middle Schools*, in which he empirically discusses experiential research on acclimation to the peculiarity of the Chinese circumstance using a Western public policy theory framework. The author brings up the question of whether the emphasis of education should be on outstanding talent or on the masses, or in other words whether nurturing a few exceptionally talented individuals or the entire school-age population of young people should be the core aim; this is a problem encountered in any country when setting education policy, and the

theoretical issue behind this decision is that of equality and benefit in education. This research when it was published not only echoed the core theme of the government's education reform to "equalize school conditions for compulsory education," but the focus of the theory behind this research—the conflicting relationship between "fairness and efficiency"—made conspicuous the value dilemma of what was most important in education reform during the previous 20 years. Looking at it from the perspective of establishing China's education policy research paradigm, the greater import of this research is that it reveals the author's growing conscientious understanding of method and research standardization and opens an age of positivism in China's education policy research.

From the year 2000, Zhenguo Yuan has been chief editor for 17 volumes of *Chinese Education Policy Review*, gathering thematic dissertations on education policy research, publishing book format periodical collections and in appendices laying out a timeline of important developments in Chinese education policy research for the past year (Yuan, 2000-2017). The project is useful as a weathervane and signpost for China education policy research of the past 20 years, allowing us to glimpse the paths Chinese educational policy has followed and the corresponding changes in research themes. From Volume 1 of 2000 through Volume 5 of 2004, every volume collected research theses into two modules: discussion of theory and commentary on practice. In the theory discussion section of every issue, the effort on the parts of both the editor and contributing researchers in the disciplinary and academic aspects of educational policy research is plain to see. In the "How to better design education policy" section of Volume 1 of 2000, a group of education policy research pioneers discuss topics including the relation between key education policy decisions and policy research, the value foundation of education policy, the cost of education policy decisions, uncertainties in policy activity, factors influencing education policy, and the extent of such policies' power. These all point to the principal problem layer of education policy research and offer a deep and detailed discussion of general problems that permeate the process of policy determination. We can see how researchers facing the imminent emergence and application of results from the theoretical field of public policy research upon the actual circumstances of Chinese education practice might in academic aspiration engage in accommodative changes, critical evaluation, or theory construction.

However, comparing the research on education practice of these first five volumes with the research on policy after 2005 makes it clearer that these may be classified as critical and discursive research styles. When engaging in research on education policy introduced by the government, researchers are not actually adhering to the reciprocity in the roles of "policy researcher" and "research policy maker" that the chief editor later strongly advocated, but are instead playing the detached role of a pure researcher standing outside his field of study. Moves since 1999 such as the policy to increase high school enrollment, measures to spur the economy through education, private school development and regulation, the industrialization of education, and the "3+X" *gaokao* reform program have for the most part been analyzed objectively and rationally.

As chief editor, Yuan's critical demarcation of "policy culture" from "academic culture" in educational activity caused a swift upsurge in educational policy research of the "key policy consultation" variety which directly faces the government. And actually, in Volume 2 of *Chinese Education Policy Review* in 2001, policy makers in the department of educational administration often directly authored pieces to advocate one educational policy or another. This kind of article became especially numerous after 2004, far exceeding the number of so-called scientific policy research. Just a few examples are "We Must Pay More Attention to Rural Compulsory Education" by Lianning Li, Director of the Ministry of Education's Basic Education Department; "Preliminary Discussions on Policy Direction for Character Education" by Ning Kang, deputy director of General Office of the Department Education, and the direct interview with the author which follows it, "The Societal Import of Lightning Students' Burden and Promoting Character Education"; "A Policy Analysis of the Development of Our Country's Basic Education and a Few Related Issues" by the deputy mayor of Suzhou, Yongxin Zhu; "Teambuilding among Middle and Elementary School Teachers: A Policy Analysis and Outlook for the Millennium" by Peijun Guan, assistant director of the personnel department of the Department of Education; and "Thoughts on Rural Tax Reform and Work in Education in Anhui" by Hanjie Jin, associate director of the Anhui Office of Education.

After this point, the essays in each volume of *Chinese Education Policy Review* turned to the second pathway advocated by Qiquan Zhong (see the "Disciplinization efforts in educational policy research" section of this article), articles specifically addressing one policy issue or another in the field of education: teacher education (2002); supervision and direction (2003); educational development and shrinking the rural-urban education gap (2004); modern education systems, higher education, and Chinese educational development (2005); Sino-foreign joint educational ventures (2006); reform of the university scientific research system (2007); fairness and efficiency in education (2008); the growth of innovative talent (2009); standards for educational quality (2010); basic public education services (2011); the modern university system (2012); internationalization of education (2013); and higher education performance assessment (2014). By 2015, issues of *Chinese Education Policy Review* no longer had distinct themes, and the articles collected for each issue very strongly echoed current policies coming from the government that year. The previous effort at an empiricist and regulated research paradigm influenced by the concept of a core principle of "process" in the field of public policy became increasingly rare. Volumes of 2016 and 2017 both concentrated on the relationship between fairness in education and related ancillary themes, which was precisely the greatest public education problem faced by the Chinese government in these years.

Disciplinization efforts in educational policy research

Meanwhile, efforts by researchers in institutions of higher learning toward the disciplinization of education policy research are comparatively apparent. In a piece titled "A New Direction for

Education Politics: Education Policy Analysis,” Zhong gives a comprehensive survey of the formation, maturation, and changing direction of education politics and uses a few representative examples from U.S. public policy studies in establishing “education policy research” as an “academic field,” proposing that policy research might be classified into “analysis of policy” and “analysis aimed at policy.” The former is primarily description and analysis of the experiential and empirical value of policy itself, done for the purpose of explaining policy through laws and regulations, with the emphasis on “objective” understanding; the latter is aimed at “improving” policy, with the emphasis on topics like the establishment of new policies, collecting information, and assessing the value of policy programs. From this basis, he continues to position educational policy research below education politics, believing that the foremost characteristic of current-generation educational policy is emphasizing experiential and empirical research, including normative and prescriptivist research making policy value judgments, policy criticism, proposals for replacement policies, and the provision of policy information. The value put on this kind of normative research is exactly the source of the “novelty” of new policy research and is one thing separating new education politics from old education politics. A second characteristic of new education policy analysis is apparent in how his research interest is not only the policy process discussed in old education politics but also policy content and policy resolution. He borrows the viewpoint of Western scholars in thinking that the categories of research themes in education policy analysis are opportunity equalization in education, a fair field, administrative systems in education, and economics and finance in education. He refers to these as specific policy issues discussed in the new politics of education. Zhong believes that in this way the disconnect of the old politics of education from real problems might be brought under control, making the field face up to specific policy topics, promoting practical research, and establishing an academic foundation for communication on the relationship between theory and practice (Zhong, 2001, pp. 247–258).

More seasoned education researchers hope to define the position of educational policy research from the standpoint of the politics of education, hope to find new territory for traditional education research, and hope that this new positioning and purpose might bring new life to a field so full of methodology but devoid of consciousness. But if an independent and unique disciplinary paradigm does not take shape as hoped, then the new position will just be putting old wine in a new bottle. This kind of educational policy research centered on policy process is expanding to classical pedagogy, education economics, education finance, and such themes; while the disciplinization of China education policy research remains incomplete, it not only makes the boundary of the discipline even less clear, but also dilutes the contributions researchers have made to education policy process research in terms of concept, principle, and method, obscuring the progress made in education policy research disciplinization.

Xie's (2001) "Discussion of Education Policy Research Classification and Theoretical Foundations" clarifies and classifies several types of Chinese and foreign education policy research as follows: researching how more ideal education policy can be set, how an education policy is determined, specifically researching one particular education policy, analyzing the theoretical framework of education policy and differentiating different types of education policy. This kind of classification is based on but distinguished from research methods and contexts already in use, though it lacks the inspiration this segment needs for further development. Similarly, education policy research abroad has for a long time been borrowing theories from other fields of discipline, and some researchers have done some enumeration of theories appearing with relatively higher frequency in policy research literature. China's education policy researchers face a similar quandary: Exactly what principles are behind or underlying education policy research? Xie invokes the related work of policy researchers abroad, proposing that the principles of education policy research are roughly sixfold: rational synthesis, progressive theory, political systems theory, group theory, elite theory, and critical theory (Xie, 2001, pp. 288–298). Each of these is relatively common in the literature of the public policy field, and accordingly the Chinese translation of Paul Sabatier's *Theories of the Policy Process* quickly became an indispensable desktop volume for education policy researchers. Actually these principles are not unique to the field of policy research, but have been borrowed and adapted by public policy researchers from sociology, political science, management, economics, and other mainstream social science disciplines.

When the field of educational policy research was first being created, most research into actual Chinese education policy by researchers in institutions of higher education adopted a critical stance. Feng in "Positioning Analysis of Current Chinese Basic Educational Policy" cites the improbable altitude and attitude of today's researchers and asks how it can be that even as Chinese basic education moves steadily toward universal compulsory education, policy positioning can still be so unclear. China is a lately developing country; its education system remains very outdated. This outdatedness is comprehensive: Basic education needs to be updated, vocational education needs to be updated, and higher education also needs to be developed. Under such circumstances, in order to attack this on all fronts, how should policy for developing basic education fit in? One section title of this article is direct—"An Error Analysis of the Positioning of China's Current Basic Education Policy"—and it cites four errors present in Chinese basic education policy: an inverted foundation (basic or specialized?), an imbalanced elite education model (operation or broader promotion?), an ossified unity (fairness or differentiation?), and polarized examinations (is the goal modeling or a variety of intellects?). The research direction revealed in this piece has an obvious discrepancy in intention with the research style displayed after many institutes of higher education set up education knowledge bases aimed at key policy consultation around 2008 (Feng, 2001, pp. 280–285). Education policy research from this time was still engaged in an attempt to

make it into a social science, with work at democratization in the policy making process, the question of delegation and agency, environmental analysis of educational policy distortion, policy value conflicts, and so on; research was focused on quitting specific cases and moving toward theoretical description of a generalized, broadly applicable policy process. But this kind of effort is primarily manifest in the assertion of research direction; it is scarce in actual empirical research, and the quality of the research has clear room for improvement as well.

From the mid-1990s, the Chinese government began a broad acceptance of educational assistance from international organizations and developed countries. The foreign experts hired to these assistance programs and the Chinese researchers in especially western region development program surveys and on-the-spot project promotions in China could distinctly see that “almost all the education research programs supported by the World Bank and other international funding organizations were policy research studies” (Yuan, 2000, p. 2);

almost all the big-name universities added colleges, departments, or areas of study related to education policy research, some simply renaming their colleges or departments of education into the ‘College of Education Policy Research’, the ‘Education Policy Research Department’ or similar names. New journals titled after one area or another of education policy research and monographs related to education policy research cropped up like bamboo after a spring rain. (Yuan, 2000, p. 2)

This direction of development was quickly seized upon by Chinese researchers, and institutes of higher education adopted education policy research as a new field for doctoral training within the education discipline. Beginning in about 2010, when some colleges and universities began specifically including “education policy research direction” in their doctoral faculty hiring advertisements, these efforts in disciplinization could be considered to have shown concrete results.

Empirical research on theory-guided educational policy

Many researchers feel this is not enough and only unwillingly accept a place under the authority of academic discussion on public policy, maintaining a practical and realistic approach, and garnering many valuable results. The “empirical research on theory-guided educational policy” topic represents these efforts and trials.

As in the development of American education policy research, the lack of basic research on the policy process cannot help improve and increase the efficacy of education. It keeps us from having the wisdom and foresight to make changes to that could spur new policies, from having the ability to confidently conjecture the potential effects of the suggestions we might make if they were to be realized, from having the ability to make timely adjustments and rectifications to policy process (Nagel, 1983). It is precisely through this kind of understanding, Chen et al. say, that basic research on education policy is largely focused on the actual condition of the education

policy process, and only through probing into the actual condition of education policy can we reveal its true nature, understand its workings, and forecast the appearance, effects of, and changes to new policies. But the true condition of policy process is often quite complicated, requiring the support and guidance of theory to clarify and understand. More than speculative research, literature research, normative research, or empirical research, innovation in education policy research requires a kind of pathway combining both theoretical exploration and substantive research; this is what we mean by empirical research on theory-guided educational policy (Chen et al., 2011, p. 1). Combining the word “innovation” with basic research allows us to walk much more solidly but also laboriously down this pathway. Because it is empirical research, the collection of empirical materials is of great importance, however in an actual political environment and actual administrative departments, it is far from easy for a researcher outside the government policy process to follow the empirical path of the social sciences to engage in “policy field research.” It becomes clear that the respective teams led by Xuefei Chen and Zhenguo Yuan began at the same time but moved in different research directions.

Around 2010, the contributing authors of Chen’s book series of *Peking University Education Policy Research Series*¹ brought out, following the direction of theory-guided empirical research on education policy, important research on our country’s higher education policy process since Reform and Opening-Up, with research on the policy space for changes in private (*minban*) higher education policy, the agenda setting process in Chinese education policy using the example of that on state student loans, advocacy coalitions and the policy process (i.e., policy directing construction priorities in Chinese higher education), the process of setting the Non-state Education Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China, the promulgation of the policy on national educational discipline centers, the gradual changes in China’s graduate education system, resource dependency and the development of graduate education (case studies of how China’s government policy to invest in technology affected graduate education), and the formation of and changes to U.S. policies on subsidizing veterans’ education, along with analysis of the beneficiaries of educational policy assessment for China’s graduate students and other topics. Through this research series, considerable progress has been made in foundational research on education policy using empirical materials and especially abstract theoretical work in the Chinese context.

Throughout this series, in introductions and epilogues, researchers nearly all described experiencing a similar moment: having meticulously refined concepts borrowed from public policy theory, upon entering the education policy process, whether in the design or implementation stages, there is a possibility that nothing will be gained. Obtaining policy documentation is also difficult. In truth, the difficulty in collecting these documents is precisely like that encountered in making sociological surveys and field research in the humanities. The difference is education policy researchers must provide theoretical analysis of actual policy process, which makes them feel the concepts and

theories taken from the field of Western public policy fall somewhat flat. We therefore face the task of restructuring concepts and building theories for the context of Chinese education.

Similar to the two pathways of the researchers described above, scholars advocating empirical research on theory-directed education policy realize that policy science may be categorized as that researching the public policy process itself, policy analysis to provide government departments with policy plans, consultative research providing policy departments with references for deciding policy, and comparative research on the public policy of other countries. Clearly, they feel, the cornerstone is policy research on the public policy process itself, and from this have come three areas of achievement.

First, using the policy case studies already made, they have amassed a wealth of knowledge on how important education policies in China were actually set and revised, and from this they have built a substantial foundation for the construction of a native Chinese education policy theory. Second is the testing, revision, and proposal of related education policy theory. The theory of education policy research comes mainly from many disciplines in the field of Western social sciences research. As a country where the social sciences have developed more recently and having more lately established groups of researchers, it is quite natural that China should see arise an ambition to surpass Western theories. In empirical research on the education policy process in China, they have tried to utilize institutional theory, organizational theory, network information theory, policy theory, and so on, as a research framework to analyze the educational policy situation in China and have found some theories can explain it very well, some require a little rectification, and other phenomena cannot be explained using existing theories, and new concepts must be introduced, such as the “policy space” that exists frequently in China’s education policy process, and the way it forces policy actors to take “strategic action” and thereby drives substantive change in education policy. Third, Chen does not believe that theory-driven education policy research is unable to deliver a consultative effect in the setting of government policy, but rather the opposite: He believes that theories going beyond singular policy themes are the most valuable, and the most broadly applicable; he is not seeing himself as a government worker who directly considers policy in the government’s stead. The primary function of the departments setting and implementing policy is action, not research, and their understanding of issues in the policy process is often of an experiential nature. Empirical research on theory-guided educational policy, on the other hand, has the potential to discover some more obvious deficiencies in the policy determination and implementation system, for example, in the process for setting and implementing education policy for private education, policy departments often have too much administrative freedom and discretion, policy regulation could be more thorough, policy resources could be exchanged, and so on. As policy on disciplinary centers is spread, there is an obvious tendency to “*YiChu WeiZheng*” (defer to “governance by the street-level bureaucracy”), and in graduate

education policy assessment, there is an obvious uniformity in the body of critique and a lack of position for those who would benefit the most. They feel that progress for the education policy system will have to be based on research, but this kind of foundation is exactly what empirical research on theory-guided education policy can provide (Chen, 2012, pp. 15–16).

To make some order of this recently emergent education policy process theory, Chen's team published a new set of teaching materials in 2011 for China's 11th Five-Year Plan, *Foundations of Educational Policy Research*, an attempt to escape from the disciplinary paradigm of earlier education policy studies, emphasizing clarification and application of foundational concepts in education policy research, expunging some underused or even unused concepts, and offering a basic framework distinct from that for public policy process research. The writing of this volume lasted the whole duration of the national Five-Year Plan. During this time, the number of education policy research articles carried in many academic periodicals continued to increase. The textbook strove to distill the unique place or influence of the "education" component of policy process, but unfortunately the authors were unable to provide a clear conclusion.

Thus, one of the biggest shortcomings of this research was the failure to return to an education standard. In the "conclusions" section, the pieces all echoed standard themes from the field of public policy research, without strong critical explanation of the uniqueness of the "education" in education policy. Just as with the fate of education research, adopting a sociological orientation by taking the empirical social sciences branch of the academic road and positioning oneself in the grand category of the social sciences is not conducive to gaining recognition as a mainstream discipline, and in fact makes the shortcomings more evident: They have not convinced those working in education practice. The reality of education is intricate and complex, with too many difficult problems to be solved; when one asks an educational researcher the way, it is not often that he gets a resolute or even very useful reply. Discussion and contention over whether education is an independent academic discipline was already disorderly and confused in the 1980s; today, education reform in countries all over the world seems to no longer require strict academic discussion, the attention being instead given to resolving issues in educational practice. The tragic fate of the Department of Education at the University of Chicago shows that if education research does not take into account the real needs of academic practice but instead single-mindedly follows the path of academia, it will be chasing its own destruction. What education researchers really need to do is pursue the path of practice and provide real support for educators, not fall in to the mainstream of the social sciences (Zhou, 2010). A similar fate befalls our young Chinese education policy researchers, brief though their story has been thus far. After working hard at building up a theoretical framework for more than 10 years, working out to which branch of the thick forest of academia the final research results belong is still a problem plaguing researchers looking at the academic transformation of education policy.

Those working their hardest to explore the academic path being taken by education policy research tend to view the policy process—including the setting of agendas, the formation of policy, legalization, policy execution, policy assessment, and policy documentation—as an object of study, and the content of the policies then comes to be treated individually as if it were an external characteristic. In the first 10 years as this field was emerging, most researchers' effort was concentrated here, awkward though it may be. If we consider it as policy process research, then education policy process research is an applied field of Western public policy research, and the collected data primarily act to verify or refute Western theory in the circumstance of China. What is awkward is that there is no one within the overall discipline of education with whom this facet of research findings can be discussed on an academic level. If we consider it as applied education policy process research, then the research findings are not attractive enough to policy makers, who view it as a sort of idealized description or critical evaluation of the process of government administration, while educators care more about the content of policies, not their operating procedure. Policy process research is often simplified by frontline educators along the lines of a Western proof of the old Chinese popular adage: "The government has its policies, and people down below have their own ways of getting around them." For Chinese education policy researchers, who have a pragmatic view of scholarship deep in their bones, this awkwardness is as close as a shadow and just as impossible to dispel.

After more than 10 years of hard work, the way to address this embarrassment is to be satisfied with individual case research and not try to promote it into deep theoretical consideration or methodology. Distilling out a particular thematic field of focus from among research on education policy published in the last 5 years is difficult. Owing to the continuing nature of education reform, an education policy research theme can be constructed directly just by appending "policy" to the end of certain content. When the concept of "policy" is applied as broadly as this, its meaning has all but disappeared. With the increasing proliferation of journal articles on education policy research, it becomes difficult to make use of a mutually exclusive and complete system of categorization to give a general survey of the field, and even harder to have effective academic debate, but these are precisely the conditions needed to establish a stable branch of study.

Guidance of major educational policy research topics and think tanks for educational policy decisions

Beginning in 1999, facing a new millennium, the government introduced a series of structural education reform measures, mostly through the document *A Plan of Action for Promoting Education in the 21st Century*, promulgated in February that year. This was a working blueprint for Chinese education reform and development as it transitioned from one century to the next, setting out clear goals for education development over 2000–2010. From here, China will continue to

advance education policy along such a path, and the focus and direction of education policy research will be determined by a policy model of similar 10-year schemes. Education policy researchers are gradually moving away from researching practical education issues and instead looking to government education policy decisions for more currently popular research topics. “Attendees showed a great degree of sincere passion, engaging in earnest discussion and broad idea exchange on the national influence of major education policy, the issue of making policy decisions more scientific, and the establishment of education policy research as a discipline” (Yuan, 2000, p. 308); these remarks are typical at the closing of education policy forums.

In June 1999, the Party Central Committee and the State Council held the third national conference on education since Reform and Opening-Up, promulgating a *Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education*. The meeting called upon “the whole Party and country, upon Chinese of all ethnicities” to work more vigorously at improving national civility and the ability to innovate, strengthen the systematic and structural reform of the education system, comprehensively promote character education, and reinvigorate the education industry as part of a national science and education-oriented revitalization strategy. In the 20 years since, the ideal for Chinese education policy has been education aimed at the overall person, and all manner of reforms revolving on character education have begun in the various branch fields. The archetypal policy example is the Eighth Curriculum Reform of the People’s Republic of China which was first put into practice in 2001, also known as “NCR” for “new curriculum reform.” Since then, topics addressing this aspect have generated a large volume of education policy research advances.

Work to make education policy research its own discipline in the beginning borrowed the dichotomy of policy research: study *of* policy and study *for* policy. The former has been interpreted as using the method of empirical research with supplementary attention to descriptive or theoretical research on policy, putting it in the category of foundational research; the latter is standard research, with a secondary emphasis on applied research. What government departments actually want most is policy assessment, which Dunn has placed between the two (Dunn, 2011, p. 73). Those who study Chinese education policy understand that the research orientation of Dunn, who enjoys a fine reputation in the field of American public policy, views academic research and government education policy decisions and policy topics as being intimately related. This choice has an obvious effect on the determination of topics in this field. Education is one of the most important issues for everyone, the hope of course being that policy which most directly affects the livelihoods of those within education obtains fundamental and legal support from academic research. Two voluminous collections of thematic reports that are classic examples of academic research supporting government education policy are 2003’s *Stride from a Country of Tremendous Population to a Country of Profound Human Resources: A Report on Chinese Education and Human*

Resources Issues (China Education and Human Resources Report Group, 2003) and 2005's *Narrowing the Gap: A Key Issue in China's Educational Policies* (Case Study Group on Major Education Policies in China in the Transitional Period, 2005). The body of education policy researchers has expanded from higher education researchers to government policy makers and executors; in fact, the field of education policy has from the beginning been able to develop at high speed thanks to being in this region of fusion where it may benefit from both these sets of resources.

The similarity between the word "policy" and the word "political" is not without reason, and policy researchers naturally work closely with policy makers. In 1999, with the support of the Ministry of Education's personnel department, the First High-Level Education Policy Analysis Symposium was held at East China Normal University (ECNU). Participants included representatives from the National People's Congress (NPC) Committee on Education, Science, Culture, and Public Health, the Policy Research Department of the State Council, the General Office of the Ministry of Education and related departments, and the National Office for Educational Science Planning, along with experts in education policy and theory from several normal universities around the country (Yuan, 2000, p. 308). For a university-held academic conference to be so well attended by this many central government departments means that from the very beginning education policy research has had a different origin and path of development from other education disciplines, with academic research and policy consultation blended together. Taking a positive interpretation, "This symposium has made a very significant step toward promoting the research of education policy science, and marks a successful beginning for communication between education policy makers and scholars." (Yuan, 2000, p. 308) Looking at it negatively, work at the disciplinization and academization of education policy research has never been unadulterated. Most theoretical resources for education policy research come from public policy research, and Western public policy research at that; in the eyes of policy-making officials in important government departments is akin to trying to scratch an itch through boot leather: It doesn't really solve the problem. As can be seen from annual project applications, education policy research that is not directed at application is not very often funded.

The current scope of national policy is greater than it has ever been, and the existence of a "policy accumulation law" is especially true for education, the numbers accumulating as unsuccessful policies require replacement. We might also give another "policy tool" theory, the "policy ineffectiveness law": The continual introduction of new policies entails weaker and weaker intended results, and increasingly apparent unintended results (Peters & Van Nispen, 1998). Thus, government demand for policy consultation has reached an all-time high. Just as Yuan has emphatically advanced at the High-Level Education Policy Analysis Symposium and in many articles,

As the educational policy environment and key policy factors become increasingly complex, setting policy becomes increasingly challenging. In order to make policy decisions more scientifically, more

democratically, more effectively, we are entirely justified in demanding that those in charge of setting policy should be researchers, and should make a concerted effort to become ‘researching policy makers’. Because the social function in which social science research is so rich is growing in importance, the associated social responsibility is also greater, so in order to ensure that academic research can have a greater impact, we are also justified in demanding that researchers should be participants in policy, and should themselves take action to become ‘policy researchers’. (Yuan, 2001, p. 363)

Recommendations and endeavors like this often cite a basis in “foreign experience,” and the typical example is the influence of human capital theory on government education policy.

After human capital theory in Western countries began to broadly influence education policy, as the field of education economics became more well-known in China in the 1990s, it came to have a direct consultative function for the government. As a more lately developed country, China found an extraordinary motivation to study other already developed countries’ experience with setting policy. For example,

After the 1960s, spurred by ‘human capital’ theory, it was felt that investment in education had the highest rate of return. Countries in Asia, Africa, and South America, out of an urgent wish to modernize and at the same stroke change their appearance of being poor and backward, invested as much as 20% or even 40% of national income into education, from which they hoped to reap great rewards, without considering the background or conditions behind these great rates of return. As a result, some countries are still shrouded beneath the influence of mistaken policy decisions made at the outset. (Yuan, 2000, p. 2)

Beginning in 2010, institutions of higher learning began to gradually establish education policy knowledge banks which were set up precisely to serve a consultative function for government education policy. In 2011, the Ministry of Education began promoting its “Collaborative Innovation” plan, driving knowledge bases to not just propose research relevant to government policy agenda but also function to award research topic contracts, further shepherding and strengthening the tendency of education policy research toward being a service for government policy making. This tendency is supported by new theories in the technology policy field in other countries, a sort of knowledge production “Mode 2.” In Gibbons’s view, Mode 2 is in contrast to Mode 1, which refers to a style of knowledge production which encompasses concept, method, value, and standards together. In many circumstances, Mode 1 is essentially the same as “science,” where knowledge and societal standards determine which problems will be viewed as important, who is permitted to engage in scientific work, and what constitutes “good science.” The style of practice that accords with these standards is defined to be “scientific,” that which goes against them viewed as “unscientific”; the words “science” and “scientist” appear frequently. In Mode 2, however, more generally encountered are the terms “knowledge” and “workers.” In Mode 1, the settings and arrangements for resolving issues are determined primarily by a certain group with a

shared academic interest, while in Mode 2, information processing is undertaken in an applied setting (Gibbons, Trow, Scott, & Schwartzman, 2011, pp. 2–3). The Mode 2 method of knowledge production is often invoked as proof of the value of the knowledge that can be produced from an education policy knowledge base. The effective application of human capital theory to policy making and this Mode 2 pathway to technological innovation are now used as a direct endorsement of researchers serving government policy decision-making, showing how difficult and how vacillatory the process of education policy research paradigm formation can be.

This explains the internal government logic behind the establishment of so many education policy knowledge bases and reveals an answer to the question “What is an education policy researcher?”—there is no clear demarcation of what makes an educational policy researcher; no stable common body of academics has been formed that might strive together toward the foundation of a disciplinary paradigm, the rational organization of academic ideas, and the establishment and handing over of a theoretical framework to a succeeding generation. Researchers in any discipline within the field of education—or even in any discipline within the social sciences—can magic themselves into dedicated education policy researchers. Even though the division of disciplines was not the result of a logical evolution within disciplines to begin with, but rather something humans formalized in order to more conveniently understand the world, and even though any discipline is not the sole territory of any one person or group of researchers, the haphazard entry or exit of various individuals does mean that the disciplinization of education policy has already faltered before it has even taken shape.

A paradigm for Chinese educational policy research is still mired in the arduous process of formulation.

Author’s note

This article is partially based on the authors’ recent review of Chinese educational policy studies, which was published as a Chinese-language article in the journal *Educational Research Monthly* (*Jiaoyu Xueshu Yuekan*) in December 2018 pp. 3–11. The use of this version has been authorized by *Educational Research Monthly* and acknowledged by *ECNU Review of Education*.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. *Peking University Education Policy Research Series* is a book series to publish the research results of the educational policy research team led by Professor Xuefei Chen of Graduate School of Education at Peking

University. It was published in Peking University Press since 2010, including *Muddling-through Changes in Graduate Education System*, *Research on Key Construction Policies of Higher Education*, *Research on Policy Diffusion of National Discipline Bases*, *Research on the Formulation Process of Private Education Promotion Law*, *Higher Education Policy Production*, *Strategic Space in the Changes of Educational Policies*, *University and the Army: Research on Manpower Policy Coordination*, and *Chinese Online Education Policy Change*.

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