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The Role of Academia in Educational Policy Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted role of academia in educational policy advocacy, analyzing the historical evolution, theoretical underpinnings, engagement strategies, and challenges that define academic involvement in policy-making. Drawing from political science frameworks, critical theory, constructivist models, and social movement theory, the study elucidates how academics contribute to shaping educational agendas, informing evidence-based reforms, and navigating complex policy ecosystems. Emphasis is placed on the intersections of academic research, public discourse, and advocacy efforts, particularly through partnerships with civil society, policy networks, and media engagement. Case studies such as Action Aid and ASPBAE highlight successful advocacy models rooted in information politics and collective action. The impact of technology on advocacy, including the emergence of counter-publicity and digital transparency, is also critically examined. Despite facing institutional and ideological constraints, academics remain pivotal in influencing education policy through informed analysis, sustained engagement, and public intellectualism. This inquiry ultimately underscores the strategic importance of academia in advancing equitable, inclusive, and context-sensitive education systems.

Keywords: Academia, Educational Policy, Policy Advocacy, Critical Theory, Constructivism, Social Movement Theory, Evidence-Based Policy, Civil Society, Education for All.

INTRODUCTION

The role of academia in educational policy advocacy is often overlooked. Academics are sought after by policymakers for their research expertise, seen as unbiased sources of information. Research influences policy through various theoretical streams, with the Political Stream highlighting policymakers' role in defining issues and priorities. The Quality Streams of the 1960s and 1970s suggested policies should reflect the best information available, while the Multiple-streams Framework illustrated how politics, policies, and problems converge to bring issues to the government's attention. Local policymakers rarely utilize these frameworks, but an International Development Framework aids them by providing arguments and evidence for educational direction. Academics typically contribute to policy by supporting practitioners who aim to influence policy, engaging at different stages of the policy cycle—from agenda-setting to policy evaluation. Beyond research, academics participate in inquiry groups, submit evidence, and consult with agencies. These actions represent just one aspect of their engagement. Academics often see themselves as policy advocates, using their expertise to impact public policy development. The public aspect of this advocacy is crucial, distinguishing it from private discussions or internal university matters. While "academic" commonly refers to university staff, it encompasses all education-related research and teaching personnel. The education policy creation process is significant and contentious. Academics act to address unfulfilled policies like "education-for-all," the Sustainable Development Goal 4, and the quality standards of education that their research suggests should be attainable. Education policy deeply affects personal futures, fostering a beneficial relationship between academics, policymakers, and practitioners that can enhance policy quality, improve policymaker effectiveness, and lead to better educational outcomes [1, 2].

Historical Context of Educational Policy

Educational policies have been crucial in changing social group positions and influencing the experiences of students and educators. The complex sociopolitical environment around education has shifted, significantly impacting school systems. The rise of technology poses both opportunities and disruptive

challenges. Critics argue that digital tools may disrupt traditional education, even leading to the obsolescence of school libraries. This calls for a critical reappraisal of policies that uphold existing power structures, as new demands for active and collaborative learning arise. Analyzing internal and external actors, technologies, and organizational structures can lead to better-informed policy discussions. Yet, long-term analyses indicate no imminent collapse of the educational system. Political contexts have shifted, affecting policy decisions. States like Delaware and Ohio have reversed their high-stakes testing requirements due to changing political climates. Despite slogans promoting education as an investment and encouraging partnerships, a turbulent political atmosphere has created uncertainty regarding standards, assessment, equity, and choice. The challenges faced by students in rural and urban areas highlight the ongoing need for effective educational leadership. Reflective teaching practices are vital for educators to effectively apply knowledge and skills. Perspectives from doctoral students in educational policy reveal that the interplay between policy and practice is complex and challenging for practitioners. Economic and political instability can undermine quality and equity, suggesting that including implementers in policymaking may yield more practical, context-sensitive outcomes. Political divisions continue to influence educational reforms, with policies favoring equity in egalitarian climates and efficiency in market-oriented ones. Understanding the historical trajectory and national political influences on educational systems is essential, as political features significantly shape educational policymaking trends [3, 4].

Theoretical Frameworks in Educational Advocacy

Social movement theory provides valuable insights into how actors who are generally perceived as lacking power can effectively engage in collective action. This theoretical framework reveals the dynamics through which these groups mobilize resources and organize efforts to influence social change. The political opportunity approach highlights the significance of external factors that impact social change initiatives, particularly within the political system. Elements such as systemic ruptures, which can disrupt the status quo, or the presence of elite allies who support these movements, are critical in determining the efficacy of collective action. Additionally, issue-framing is a strategic tool that enables activists to customize their advocacy efforts to align with specific objectives and leverage particular opportunities for change. In the realm of global educational governance, civil society organizations have emerged as key players in advocating for equitable educational access under the Education for All (EFA) agenda. Their contributions extend beyond mere participation; civil society is essential for the delivery of educational services aimed at reaching marginalized groups, ensuring their voices and needs are considered. Moreover, civil society's involvement in broader state-led policy discussions enhances the legitimacy of these initiatives, allowing for a more inclusive approach to education reform. The EFA High Level Group Meeting, along with the Working Group on EFA and the Collective Consultation of NGOs, serves as important platforms for civil society advocacy. These gatherings create opportunities for civil society to engage with governmental frameworks and assert their stance on educational policies endorsed by those in power. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that these venues often reflect donor interests and influences, frequently favoring large northern international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). This tendency can marginalize the contributions and perspectives of southern civil society groups, thereby impacting the overall representation and effectiveness of advocacy efforts aimed at promoting equitable education for all [5, 6].

Critical Theory

Critical theory serves an essential role in examining and challenging existing power structures, with the ultimate aim of influencing educational policies to bring about positive transformation and meaningful change. It reveals the extent to which middle- and upper-class interests have, throughout history, shaped and molded educational policies to further their own objectives and maintain their positions of privilege. This theoretical framework not only critiques exclusionary policies but also sheds light on the broader social implications that arise from such a context. By incorporating critical theory into teacher education programs, educators are equipped to advocate more effectively for themselves, for their students, and for their communities. This, in turn, promotes social justice and empowers individuals who have been marginalized or underserved in educational systems. Furthermore, critical theory provides vital insights into the policies that construct teaching as not merely a profession but as a social and political act deeply connected to the class struggles that have historically structured societal dynamics. Given this context, it becomes evident that the various factors influencing student achievement are closely tied to and reflective of a class-based social order. As a result, it is imperative to understand and actively address these complex dynamics through rigorous critical theoretical analysis in order to foster a more equitable educational landscape. Through the lens of critical theory, educators can challenge the status quo and work towards

creating an inclusive environment that supports all learners, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds [7, 8].

Constructivist Approaches

Constructivism contributes theoretically to understanding actors, settings and the policy process. Oversimplifying, such approaches contend that much policy advocacy centres on persuading others to adopt a particular view of the world, since actors necessarily have different assumptions about the nature of policy problems, the interests involved and the best course of action. Advocacy is therefore an essentially social task, concerned with learning and influencing what others think. In this perspective, information or evidence becomes the subject of interpretation and contestation, rather than an incontestable commodity. Even supposedly 'hard' evidence may have many possible interpretations, depending on how the problem is understood. Researchers with the Harvard Advocacy Coalition Approach, for example, have studied the use of evidence in the development of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Constructivist approaches have been used to analyse the strategies used by policy actors to frame and re-frame educational problems – for example, the use of 'anti-education' or 'parental choice' as a way of defining policy problems so as to support an underlying policy point; or the construction of 'education market failure' as an argument for more policy intervention. Collaboration between advocates and sympathetic print journalists can be a particularly effective means of framing an issue, while dissemination is more effective if advocates use relatively contentious strategies such as large-scale protests. Researchers with this kind of focus seek to understand the conditions under which efforts to influence the discourse are more and less likely to succeed. The use of evidence is complicated even further in such perspectives. Because evidence does not provide a straightforward 'answer' or policy position, they assume that even well-intentioned researchers may need to consider the representativeness of research they use and the possible interpretations of their data [9, 10].

The Role of Research in Policy Making

Within the debates around 'what works,' there exists an unexploited academic space and a valuable challenge for researchers to play a role in bringing clarity to complex questions. Persuasive evidence will be a necessary ingredient for changing perceptions and funding priorities. Research emphasis is increasing on evidence that can be 'scaled up.' In the broader political ecology of education systems, evidence from research plays an increasingly important role – for example, through advocacy, professional learning programs, and the establishment of professional standards and positions. Nevertheless, determining what can be trusted (research, rhetoric, or ideology) often requires academic expertise. In a democratic system, tensions may arise between the role of experts and that of the wider public when addressing complex issues that have broader public policy implications. Problems that are multi-dimensional and multifaceted would appear to require the attention of experts. Academics are therefore often drawn in as strategic actors who seek to influence policy formulation. The reviewing of academic evidence represents one phase in the formulation process and some policy outputs emerge as a consequence of research and development activities. Policy formulation therefore offers challenges and opportunities for researchers to shape the outcomes of government, sector and leadership frameworks. During the early phases of research, formal and informal academic networks form the foundation upon which higher levels of communication and information sharing occur. These linkages strengthen the reputation, influence and trust placed on national education and research more generally. The subsequent dissemination of research results likewise influences specific users and encourages take-up and application. Education policy is a particularly critical area; education practitioners often rely upon the views and scholarship of academics who seek to understand the full range of policy stages, from design to implementation and evaluation. Policy education and training therefore constitute additional roles for researchers who either assist the process or play a more direct role in shaping and implementing policy [11, 12].

Engagement Strategies for Academics

To become a trusted voice for policymakers, academics should continuously provide expertise through clear communication, sustained relationships, flexible engagement, and public discourse. Making research data publicly accessible and offering succinct summaries of problems and solutions help initiate policy interactions. Employing storytelling techniques, emotional appeals, or humor can persuade policymakers while reaching a wider audience. Understanding policy processes, the policymaking context, and key actors is vital; recognizing the political nature of policy decisions involving diverse stakeholders further refines influence. Developing a routine, flexible, and humble approach fosters genuine, long-term relationships with policymakers while maintaining trust and non-partisanship. Investing effort and time underpins this process—the most efficient means to become a dependable policy advisor. Academic

literature, particularly in media literacy, should be widely disseminated to aid the construction of informed public debates and promote civic, political, and media literacy. The public policy landscape remains competitive and fragmented, encompassing consultancies, specialist advisers, NGOs, philanthropic foundations, political parties and politicians, commercial media, and specialized journalism. Drawing on several decades of engagement experience, academics can contribute in various ways to the public sphere: through publication of research, knowledge exchange exercises, advisory posts, media involvement, and participation in specialist forums [13, 14].

Case Studies of Successful Advocacy

During the past decade, the ability to describe social problems accurately and to demonstrate that governments and international agencies have failed to respond appropriately has become a valuable asset to advocacy organizations that seek to influence educational policy, priorities, and goals. As a consequence, a growing array of civil society organizations have sought to increase their role in global educational advocacy by attempting to monitor progress towards the Education for All (EFA) goals and to evaluate the effectiveness of their major policies. Little attention, however, has been given to the process through which these organizations gather and generate evidence or to the impact that this process has on education policy and on the broader role of civil society in global change. The analysis focuses attention on the political power derived from the organizations' capacity to collect and disseminate information, referred to as information politics. Two organizations that play important roles in the EFA advocacy network and that engage explicitly with information politics serve as case studies: ActionAid International, a transnational development agency, and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), a coalition of national education associations. By examining the means through which they collect, generate, and disseminate information, it becomes possible to shed light on their internal strategies and to characterise the distinctive role that they occupy within the wider field of development education [15, 16].

Challenges Faced by Academics

Academics face numerous challenges, particularly regarding their roles and societal expectations. Cass Star observes that current academic work patterns threaten teaching quality. The social work field expresses concern over the decline of the public intellectual and the academic retreat from citizenship, indicating a crisis in universities. Economic liberalism and global competition restrict research and limit community engagement opportunities. While academic activism has the potential to affect societal issues, many perceive a decline in influence. However, all forms of engagement are complex, shaped by values and beliefs linked to various political projects. Scholars aiming to maintain independence from government and commercial interests contribute neutrally to public policy. This "disinterest" suggests a commitment to values while avoiding personal benefits from their advice. Engagement is based on a proactive, supply-led model of idea generation. Yet, contemporary policy analysis is increasingly defined by an audit culture demanding compliance with refined performance indicators tied to external funding and validation. This environment necessitates that research meets externally defined requirements. Although public intellectuality is encouraged, it is conditional. The ideal of free thought struggles to coexist with a market-driven knowledge system. Consequently, the model of necessity often overshadows the ideal of intellectual freedom [17, 18].

The Impact of Technology on Advocacy

As the internet evolved, activists began utilizing its information-sharing capabilities, despite early limitations. While transparency was initially seen as crucial for advocacy, realities diverged from this expectation. Publicly asked questions often yield poor responses, revealing information gaps that can aid competitors or political opponents. Moreover, public information demands do not guarantee responses. The concept of "counter-publicity" emerged; where activists upload information to webspaces loosely connected to targeted audiences, creating a form of persistent pressure as these uploads resist deletion. Although specific controversies may change, governments and corporations face ongoing scrutiny, leaving them vulnerable to counterarguments. Historically, calls for evidence have existed, but the internet provides tools to bypass the limitations of traditional messaging, allowing for more persuasive evidence to emerge. The vast availability of data is known but often hard to sift through, making repeated challenges possible. Information monitoring services facilitate continued engagement in activism by automatically gathering and summarizing discussions relevant to emerging issues. However, this shift has also led to a rise in opacity, undermining the idea that publicity maintains pressure. Governance struggles in open structures lead to broader dissemination of conflicting information, allowing for the circulation of counter-evidence and alternative interpretations [19, 20].

Ethical Considerations in Advocacy

Although advocacy is a legitimate expectation and responsibility of universities and is regarded as 'a necessary element of the academic role', institutions must consider how best to engage with third parties, such as NGO campaigners, government officials, or commercial interests. The effect of external interest groups on the academic role can lead to increased policy-oriented research, consultation, and involvement, but it may also limit a scholar's ability to express theoretically informed views that contradict the agenda of the influencing party. Academics risk their academic reputation when engaging with nonacademic entities, although political economists have differentiated the appropriate degree of contractualisation depending on the tasks involved and the nature of the third-party influent. Universities are not neutral actors, but neither should they readily become instruments of interest groups or political advocacy. Individual academics also have a responsibility to separate their advocacy efforts from their teaching and research activities. In organisations such as schools, this requires a distinction between advocacy roles related to educational policy or practice and the implementation of such policy and practice. It is nevertheless essential both on a broad policy level and for individual institutions that the advocacy role of an organisation such as a university is effectively conducted. The concept of 'information politics' highlights ways in which the instrumental role of evidence in educational advocacy can be wielded by a campaigner without adversely influencing the academic or professional integrity of the scholar [21, 22].

Future Directions for Academic Advocacy

Advocacy has become an essential and indispensable component of the field of academic pediatrics today. Engaging in the political process and related activities can significantly facilitate evidence-based legislative, regulatory, or budgetary changes that ultimately lead to improved health outcomes for children. In order to cultivate and develop meaningful faculty advocacy activities and scholarship effectively at both the individual and systems levels, institutional support is not just beneficial; it is necessary. A long-term perspective must be adopted because the success of advocacy efforts often takes years to materialize, and the journey is usually circuitous, with various obstacles and detours along the way before the desired outcomes are fully realized. As advocacy practices become thoroughly integrated into the framework of the academic health system, continued support from senior leadership will be crucial, alongside dedicated and sustained efforts from faculty members and trainees alike. Educational policy offers numerous opportunities for building partnerships with educators across the nation and showcasing the power of academic advocacy in real-time action. Institutions that actively embrace the challenges and opportunities that come with engaging in this vital work not only benefit their immediate communities but also lead by example on the national stage. Engaging with advocacy not only fulfills a responsibility but also paves the way for transformative changes that can benefit future generations of children and their families [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Academics hold a critical position in the advocacy and development of educational policy. Through research-informed engagement, they act not only as knowledge producers but also as strategic actors in shaping public discourse and policy direction. Their participation ranging from agenda-setting to implementation and evaluation bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering insights that respond to local and global educational challenges. Theoretical models like critical theory and constructivism provide tools for challenging structural inequalities, while social movement theory reveals how academics, alongside civil society, can mobilize for change. Technological advancements have expanded the scope of advocacy, enabling new modes of information sharing and pressure-building. Nonetheless, academics face institutional, political, and economic challenges that constrain their influence. Navigating these tensions requires sustained commitment to public engagement, non-partisanship, and strategic communication. Ultimately, empowering academia as a central stakeholder in educational policymaking strengthens the democratic foundations of education systems and fosters more equitable and effective learning outcomes worldwide.

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