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BOOK REVIEW - *The Culture of Education Policy*

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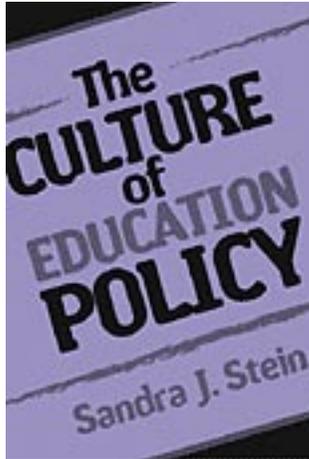


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BOOK REVIEW

Sandra J. Stein, *The Culture of Education Policy*.
New York, 2004. Teachers College Press. 216 pages.
Paperback: \$26.95, ISBN: 0807744794
Cloth: \$56.00, ISBN: 0807744808

Sandra Stein's *The Culture of Educational Policy* is an excellent book. It should be prominently featured in courses on educational policy, the social foundations of education, the history of education, educational research methods, and in political science and government classes. It should also be read, perhaps at multiple sittings to digest all its implications, by congressional aides, federal and state educational bureaucrats, and others

who shape or care about the trajectory of American public education. It is that important. Using discourse analysis to review 30 years of Congressional testimony related to the creation and extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and then ethnographic techniques at a nested sample of nine schools observed implementing federal Title I, bilingual education, and integration mandates from 1993–1995, Stein illustrates powerfully how the culture of policy, her name for the federal adaptation and simplification of Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty (pp. xi–xii), has embedded deficit-oriented understandings that, in turn, have undercut the ostensible equity orientation of the policies. Although this is not one of her intended purposes, her methodology, described in a lengthy appendix (pp. 145–162) demonstrates potently how tragically misguided the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences posture is that views anything other than experimental and quasi-experimental research designs as lesser modes of inquiry. Stein's account sheds a lot of light on why equity-intending treatments have not frequently yielded equity outcomes.

Stein, who is now Academic Dean and thus trainer of aspiring school leaders at the NYC Leadership Academy, begins her book with a powerful metaphor: "the policy dozens." The dozens, she explains, are a children's game of rapid-fire exchanges of insults. The policy dozens are a little different. She writes, "Policymakers are not schooled in delivering swift, comedic portrayals of policy beneficiaries that last only as long as the conversations themselves" (p. 2). But she insists that comedic, insulting, and ultimately tragic portrayals of the policies' ostensible beneficiaries is in fact exactly what policymakers have done. She then adds that policy dozens are different from a childhood game because:

in the policy process, only those in positions of power get to play, and the insults outlast the conversations in which they are delivered. This new level of the dozens involves the portrayal of individuals and communities as deviant and deficient by people essentially disconnected from those individuals and communities. . . . The name-calling practices inherent in the childhood dozens transmute into labeling practices in the policy dozens, the labels becoming stigmatized identity markers in the institutions of policy delivery (p. 2).

The Culture of Educational Policy is divided into six chapters that together aggregate two major studies and some smaller ones that Dr. Stein has carried out. One study is a content analysis of the Congressional dis-

course generated as part of the formation and passage of each of the Elementary and Secondary Education Acts from 1965 through 1994. That study is presented in Chapters 2 and 3. The second study, derived from her dissertation research, looks at practitioners at nine California elementary schools as they make sense of federal policies. The first part of this second study (Chapter 4) describes the response to the 1988 and 1994 ESEAs that were the law of the land between 1993 and 1995. The second part of this second study (Chapter 5) then looks at how, during the same time period, practitioners at these schools responded to two other federal policies—desegregation and bilingual education. Chapter 6, the briefest in the book, offers an update, linking her mid-1990s fieldwork and her analysis of the first 30 years of ESEA to the most recent incarnation of ESEA, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB).

The discourse analysis is told largely chronologically, with Chapter 2 recounting the Congressional debates leading to the first ESEA in 1965 and Chapter 3 offering briefer accounts of the debates around the reauthorizations of 1966, 1967, 1970, 1974, 1978, 1981, 1988, and 1994. The details are harrowing. For example, hinting at the role of race in the culture of policy, Stein counts 58 references to “slums” in the 1965 debate and just one to “poor whites” (p. 40). In the 1970 debate, she notes New York Senator Charles Goodell’s introduction of the term “predelinquency” to describe as ESEA targets the children who “have not been adjudicated delinquents nor have they been before a court, and yet they are what might be termed disruptive troublemakers or potential delinquents” (p. 59). The larger analysis is even more penetrating because Stein uses it to clarify the enduring tension between the ESEA framers’ assumption that individual poverty automatically equated with educational disadvantage versus the assumption that the ESEA dollars should target students who did not perform well. By focusing on the individual and poverty, the first problem diagnosis ignored whether there were inequities in expenditures by school (i.e., it did not *per se* target schools that were at a disadvantage in relation to other schools) and whether a student was performing well. The second problem diagnosis, meanwhile, created a perverse incentive to perpetuate struggling students’ disadvantage, because, as long as such students struggled, then there would be resources to pay for more teachers. Neither diagnosis took a critical structural perspective and neither used an asset perspective to acknowledge the skills, experiences, and curiosities that targeted children (like untargeted children) bring with them into the classroom.

The discourse analysis of Chapters 2 and 3 (and echoed in Chapter 6) sets the stage well for the ethnographic study in following chapters that illustrates the ways in which practitioners at nine schools frequently reiterate the original ESEA crafters' problem diagnoses in their practice. This is particularly the case for Chapter 4, which focuses on practitioners' implementation of ESEA. Chapter 5 is not quite as successful because, though insightful, its focus on the implementation of federal bilingual education guidance (more accurately the guidance for instruction of identified English language learners) and desegregation has not been previewed with scrutiny of the congressional and, in these cases, judicial origin for the policies. Summing up the second study, Stein writes:

The culture of policy theory provides a framework for understanding how complicated ethnic and racial identities are reduced to rigid classification schemes and how classroom ethnic and racial compositions are organized then reorganized based on limited, and at times educationally insignificant, information. Like Title I, the equity-oriented policies of bilingual education, desegregation, special education, and school reorganization for low-performing schools all share a tendency to categorize and mark certain students, to define them as lacking and deficient, to explain difference and diversity in reductive and stigmatizing ways, and to create incentives for the segregation of the population marked as deficient in order to generate resources with which to serve them (p. 128).

Writing Chapter 6 after NCLB was passed but before there was much of an extant record of its implementation, Stein acknowledges that "on first blush" (p. 133) NCLB shed some of the longstanding ESEA hazards of labeling and stigmatizing students and financially rewarding continued low achievement. But she then notes that the stigmatizing process has perhaps only been changed in terms of scale, with failing schools rather than failing students now painted by the policy brush. She acknowledges that a number of states responded to NCLB by lowering their previously approved state standards so as to have fewer of their schools labeled as failing. She then goes on to question the viability of key part of NCLB – the right of children at "failing schools" to transfer to more successful ones. Successful schools will be skeptical of accepting such children or expecting much of them as, first, such children are stigmatized by being part of a low-performing environment and, second, the successful schools need to ensure that they are not changed in ways that risk their subsequently being labeled "failing."

While I am obviously impressed by Stein's accomplishments in this volume, I do have two critiques of her work. Anthropologists of educational policy and others taking a sociocultural perspective to the study of policy are increasingly using a rudimentary definition of policy as the combination of problem diagnoses and strategies for their resolution (see Sutton & Levinson, 2001; Hamann & Lane, 2004). As such, educational policy can be generated by Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, a state department bureaucrat, or a principal or classroom teacher. Also a chain of problem diagnoses and strategies of action can be traced for all involved in the origin of policy and its conversion to praxis. Stein hints at a role for intermediaries, acknowledging, "federal, state, and local bureaucrats interpret the policy regulations that are built on these assumptions" (p. 136), but mostly leaving them faceless and without agency. This matters because it means the final third of her story, the portion that links federal policymaking to instructions for school personnel, is untold.

This also matters because it is the faceless bureaucrats who are most likely to tolerate or challenge teacher resistance to the culture of policy. Because her research design permitted her to look comparatively at different schools' responses to the same formal policies, Stein recognized a pattern at several that she labeled "thoughtful noncompliance." In a nutshell, this posture can be characterized as teachers honoring the spirit rather than the detail of the law. Stein is correct that adept practitioners often respond to formal policy in this way, in part because they often have to reconcile conflicting mandates or have to try to do too much with too little time. Building from her recognition and celebration of thoughtful noncompliance, however, Stein recommends in several places (e.g., pp. 24–25, 129, 131, 136) that practitioners resist policy directives that embed pejorative or simplistic understandings of their policy targets. While from both a romantic and pragmatic stance I can sympathize with this perspective, it seems to construct the remedy for hazardous policy presumptions on the backs of teachers, not commenting on the perils that non-compliance can invite. Stein has laid out too powerful and too sweeping a critique for teacher resistance to be the best solution for what she identifies. Stein's book will keep readers thinking all the way through. Perhaps generating a more holistic strategy for countering the hazards she has identified is more our charge than hers.

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