EDLPS 567 Education Policy for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning

Spring Quarter, 2015

Time: Wednesdays, 4:30 - 6:50 pm
Location: Miller Hall 320
Instructors: Min Sun and Michael Knapp
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Course Description

Overview

This course is designed to introduce students a variety of educational policy strategies that are aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in P-12 settings. Since this is a course for graduate students, it aims to help students build a rich framework for analyzing policies of various types, both theoretically and methodologically. There are two major learning objectives:

1. To build a rich framework for how policies of various types may guide, direct, or support the improvement of teaching and learning in PreK-12 classrooms, and also how such policies may lead to unintended consequences. Students are also expected to explore the viability of the policy designs and their likelihood of bringing about lasting and positive change in classrooms, as well as the broader, deep-seated economic, sociological, and political motivations for those policies.

2. To critically explore evidence concerning the effects of policies on teaching and learning. We will delve into analytic methods and research designs that investigate the impacts of policies at federal, state, district, and school levels on student learning outcomes and teaching practice, as well as the relevant mechanisms whereby the policies are achieving these effects.

To achieve these goals, we will start by exploring the possible relationships between instruction and policy, by considering questions such as “what constitutes effective instruction?”,” “do value-

1 Academic Accommodations
To request academic accommodations due to a disability, please contact Disabled Student Services, 448 Schmitz, (206) 543-8924 (V/TTY). If you have a letter from Disabled Student Services indicating you have a disability that requires academic accommodations, please present the letter to us so we can discuss the accommodations you might need for class. Please contact the instructors should there be any other circumstance or aspect of the course for which you might need assistance.
added measures capture effective teaching?”, and “how can federal, state, and district policies influence the effectiveness of instruction?” Next, we will discuss two competing yet potentially complementary strategies that underlie many educational policies and school reforms: test-based accountability and market-based choice. Then, we will spend the rest of this quarter analyzing the intended and unintended consequences of several often-debated policies, including, but not limited to, aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and the teacher workforce (e.g., through teacher performance evaluation and incentives, pre-service preparation, in-service professional development, curriculum reform, and instructional technology).

We selected course readings that satisfy at least two of three criteria: (1) a focus on highly-debated and important policies, such as those noted above; (2) a theoretically sound or helpful basis for conceptualizing policy implementation and effects; (3) innovative measurement and strong identification strategies. Overall, we have favored readings with quantitative measurement and analysis, given the importance attached to such approaches in policy circles; however, we have also included some mixed measurement and qualitative efforts to capture policy effects. We made a special effort to balance both synthesis work and empirical studies, so that students, regardless of their level of relevant methodological training, can appreciate the debates on these policy issues. Detailed content is included in the section of “Readings and Course Schedule”.

**Pedagogical Approach**

We will do our best to make this class intellectually stimulating and practically relevant. We plan to use diverse strategies of organizing classroom activities to allow students’ full participation in the discourse and debates on class. We will also offer mini-lectures and other presentational materials to help students not only develop their own propositions on an issue, but also develop a systematic knowledge about this issue.
Course Policies and Requirements

Late Assignment

Students are expected to turn in the assignments on time. If you are unable to complete your work on time due to unavoidable circumstances, you must speak to us as soon as possible about this so that we can make alternative arrangements.

Attendance Requirement

Since it is a discussion-based course, your presence in the classroom is essential. If you must be absent from a class, you need to (a) inform us ahead of time; and (b) within a week of missing class, you must submit a one-page summary for the main readings covered in class on the day you missed class.

Evaluation

1. Finishing readings and class participation (25%): Students are expected to participate fully in weekly discussions. It is essential that you come to class having read all the assigned articles and ready to engage in interactions with your classmates. Your engagement in these materials is crucial. Please remember that how well you do on this part of the assignment benefits not just you but also your classmates because we all learn from each other.

2. Course Project (75%): The project that you are asked to complete during this course is an iterative assignment, so that you can receive multiple rounds of feedback from us to make your final paper stronger. You can choose from the following four options—all focus on the relation between educational policies and the improvement of teaching and learning in classrooms, and all will use as a reference point the notion of the “instructional core”, which treats instruction as the interaction among teacher, leaders, and content.

   Option 1. Analyze a policy: Use concepts and ideas learned from this course to discuss (a) the potential positive or negative influences of a particular policy on instruction, based on an analysis of the policy’s theory of action, and/or (b) the actual effects of the policy, both intended and unintended, on teaching and learning. Students are expected to probe the underlying assumptions for this policy and use empirical evidence from literature to back up their argument whenever possible. Your paper will be based on whatever literature you can assemble about the policy, preferably presenting multiple views of the policy’s design, implementation, and effects.

   Option 2. Methodological critique: Select one article that presents empirical evidence about the effects of a policy on classroom instruction, and offer a methodological critique, with a primary focus on the quality of the research design, conceptualization, and analysis. You are expected to assess the measures, the conceptual model connecting policy intervention with teaching and learning, the capacity of the research design to support causal claims, and the degree to which the evidence supports the claimed findings and conclusions.
Option 3. Contrast two policy strategies: Contrast two different policy strategies aimed at improving teaching and learning (e.g., policies emphasizing teacher in-service professional development vs. policies that focus on teacher evaluation and accountability) in terms of their demonstrated—or likely—impacts on classroom instruction. Here, the paper will draw on whatever literature you can find that sheds light on each policy strategy (and possibly their relative merits) and discuss the underlying assumptions, demonstrated impacts, pros and cons of each.

Option 4. Student-generated alternative: It is possible that you will have a different purpose for taking this course, and would like to propose an alternative project. The alternative project still needs to primarily focus on educational policies and their current or possible relationships with classroom instruction. You may do so, with the instructors’ permission. Please use the first installment to propose your alternative topic, or possibly contact us before that time to “try out” an idea for your project. If so, your installments will follow the same timetable as Options 1 – 3.

The first installment: Due on April 15 (week 3)
1- pager single-spaced outline description of which option and topic that you want to pursue for the final project, along with a brief outline (optional) and an initial bibliography, if known.

The second installment: Due on May 20 (week 8)
5-8 double-spaced pages of mid-term paper offering a working draft of as much of the paper as you can assemble by that point in the quarter, but at least the introductory sections, conceptual discussion, and as much of your analysis section(s) as you reasonably draft by that point. (We would be delighted to look at a completed first draft, if you can get it together by Week 8.)

The last installment: Due on June 10 (week 11)
15-20 double-spaced pages of the completed final paper, responsive to our feedback on earlier installments.
Readings and Course Schedule

Week 1(4/1) — Overview and Introduction to Policy as a Means of Improving Instruction

In this week, besides overviewing topics in this course and introducing everyone, we will spend time discussing the diverse expectations and conflicting ideals that the public holds for American public education, including social excellence, equity, equality, and liberty (i.e., closing achievement/opportunity gaps and improving achievement levels). Individual policy and reform in education may not be able to achieve these broad goals equally well, and it is possible that these goals can compete with each other. Moreover, these ideals may appeal to different stakeholders. This week will overview questions about how efforts to improve teaching and learning in public schools might fall at the intersection of these ideals, and also how they might be differentially expressed in different public policies aimed at improving teaching and learning.

We will also introduce the central themes and issues of the course: (1) How policies purport to reach classrooms and exert influences on teaching and learning; (2) the nature of evidence (so far) regarding the effects and efficacy of these policies at achieving its ideals. If we have time, we will also start the discussion about what good instruction might entail, and use the MET projects to understand the complexity of measuring instructions. We will continue to discuss these matters in more detail in the third week.

Main Reading


Week 2 (4/8) — Imagining how policies and instruction are connected

This week will discuss the connection between policies and instruction in the following respects:

- The nature of instruction: How can we most productively understand what “instruction” entails, as the target of policy? Conceived as the interaction of teacher, learners, and content in context. Instruction has been the target of many policy and reform initiatives, because the assumption is that instruction is the most immediate “cause” of student learning.

- The nature of policies: what exactly is a “policy”? It may constitute a broad societal response to a perceived policy “problem”, or a particular configuration of policy actors and policy tools (e.g., an intervention). A policy is more than a mandate; rather, it constitutes a “purposeful course of action…”

- The avenues of policy influence on instruction: Through what route(s) might policies exert their influence on teaching and learning?
• *The policy’s “theory of action”:* Assumptions about how policy actions will address whatever is assumed to be causing poor teaching practice, low student learning, or wider achievement gaps.

**Main Reading:**


**Optional readings:**


**Week 3 (4/15)—Capturing the Effects of Policies on Teaching and Learning**

Given a way to conceptualize instruction, educational policies, and the avenues whereby they might be connected, as well as the “theory of action” embedded in a given policy design, we turn to the task of developing evidence about the implementation and effects of policies on instruction and the learning outcomes it is meant to produce. In this spirit, we will focus this week on methodological debates about how one can best capture the effects of policies on teaching and learning. As you may tell from the previous sentence, the outcome measures used in this branch of policy research concern teaching and/or student learning. We will first revisit the difficulties of capturing the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. What distinguishes high quality teaching from teaching practice that is lower in quality? What do we value in instructional or learning outcomes? What do tests capture and what do they miss? How can we measure the quality of the interactions among teacher, learners and content? While this is an elusive goal, given the complexity of teaching and learning, recent methodological work has taken us closer to a robust set of measures and analytical tools for detecting these effects.

Along with a discussion of measures, we will review methods of inquiry that are likely to shed light on the effects of these policy interventions on measured instructional outcomes, with special emphasis on quantitative designs (descriptive and inferential statistical analysis) but also with some attention to qualitative illumination of processes. Experimental studies have been regarded as the “gold standard” for establishing causal relationships between the policy
“treatment” and outcomes—what are the potential problems of, as well as the possibilities for, conducting experimental studies? What are the alternatives? We will spend time on the following inquiry issues that are the focus of hot policy debates:

- Tests as measures of learning outcomes, value-added measures of instructional programs, school productivity, and educators’ performance.
- As the potential for using multiple measures of outcomes in studies of policy effects on instruction.
- The possibilities for useful causal inferences using experimental and quasi-experimental designs aimed at teaching and learning. A goal of this discussion is to prepare students to be critical “consumers” of this type of research articles.

**Main Readings:**


**Optional readings (strongly encouraged):**

3. MET project (2014). *Ensuring fair and reliable measures of effective teaching: culminating findings from the MET project’s three-year study.*

**Assignment due:** First installment of course project.

**Week 4 (4/22)— Holding the School to Account(I): Test-based accountability policies**

Week 4 & 5 will introduce two competing yet complementary policy strategies that underlie the design of many educational policies and school reform initiatives that aim to improve teaching and learning. We will first discuss policy strategies that emphasize performance accountability, through systems set up and managed by the educational institutions themselves. The essence of this form of accountability is to evaluate school and teacher performance based on aggregated students’ achievement on standardized tests, and then to use administrative mechanisms to sanction low-performing schools/teachers and/or reward high performance. This week and the next will primarily focus on school accountability, on the premise that the school is the relevant unit of accountability, and if held to account, teaching will change in response. The guiding questions for this week’s readings are:

- What are the aims of test-based accountability policies? What are some of the possible worries?
- What is the underlying logic of these policy strategies? What do they assume about motivation, teaching practice, organizational change, and
how the dynamics they set in motion will bring about needed improvements in the instructional core?

- What methods have researchers used to assess the impacts of test-based accountability on teaching and learning outcomes? And what have these methods revealed about the effects of these policies on their intended targets?

**Main Readings:**


**Optional Readings:**


**Week 5 (4/29) — Holding the School to Account(II): Market- and Choice-based policies**

A strikingly different strategy rests on alternative assumptions about “accountability,” performance, and the motivation to excel: by utilizing “market” dynamics and empowering choice by the “consumers” of education, schools—and presumably, teaching and learning within them—are accountable to those served by the schools, rather than those who manage the schools. Market-based mechanisms in American public education commonly include school choice in its various forms (e.g., charter schools, vouchers, tax credits for private school tuition, and intra- or inter-district choice). The market mechanisms are theorized to ensure that parents and students play much more central and influential roles in determining the allocation of school resources, as well as the design and execution of educational programs. Under these policy scenarios, parents and students have the freedom to choose between schools (or programs) and to switch from one to another as they wish. Schools would then have to please their clients by making better decisions and competing in the market. Moreover, principals, as personnel managers of school organizations, are often granted more autonomy to hire teachers with diverse professional backgrounds and who are less likely to have union membership, though who are presumably best able to teach the academic program the school sets up. Regarding these policy strategies, we will ask:

- In what ways, and how much, do school choice mechanisms create competition among public schools?
• How does or can competition among public schools affect teaching and learning, ultimately benefiting or otherwise affecting students? What is the logic of these strategies?
• What evidence has been developed to date regarding the effects of market- and choice-based policies on teaching and learning outcomes? What further evidence might we need?

Main readings:


Optional reading:


Week 6 (5/6)—Motivating the Teacher: Teacher incentive strategies

Policy need not focus on the school as the primary unit of accountability and reform. A straightforward alternative logic presupposes that the individual teacher’s motivations, beliefs, knowledge and skills, or assignment is an equally good or better target for policies that seek change in teaching and learning. We shift in this week and the next three to different, teacher-focused strategies for reaching the instructional core. All of them attempt to improve the work, and the capacity for work, of the adult professionals who are presumed to create and sustain the learning opportunities for students, ultimately shaping student learning outcomes.

This week, we tackle teacher incentive systems. The use of performance measures based on explicit and uniformly defined criteria and metrics has long been a fundamental component of both public- and private-sector personnel incentive systems. One of most popular concepts for understanding this performance measurement system is “principal-agent theory” (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989). It is based on the assertion that the principal (e.g., the employer) cannot observe agents (e.g., employees)’ true effects; rather, only agents themselves know their true effort and performance. To address this asymmetric information, the employer can align the incentives for employees with the organizational goals. For example, in public schools, the most important goal is to increase students’ knowledge and skills so that they are able to effectively participate in a variety of functions and activities as citizens in a society when they become adults. Aligning measures of teachers’ performance closely with students’ learning will motivate teachers’ efforts and in turn contribute to schools’ organizational values. Regarding this policy strategy, we ask:
• Does this assumption really work for teachers? What are the assumed mechanisms by which teachers will respond appropriately to these policy pressures?
• What evidence exists concerning teachers’ response to this kind of policy? What do we know about the effects on student learning?

**Main reading:**


**Optional reading:**


**Week 7 (5/13)—Assessing the Teacher’s Work: Teacher Performance Evaluation Strategies and Feedback**

There are more ways to “reach” the teacher through policy action than to alter their incentives. Another set of policy strategies, particularly popular in recent years, zeros in on the direct evaluation of teachers’ work. This class of policy strategies aims at a different form of accountability in the education system, in which individual professionals, rather than the school as a whole, is treated as the relevant unit of accountability. Rather than placing main emphasis on motivating the teacher to improve through an external incentive system, the performance evaluation approach generates both formative and summative feedback, in different degree depending on the evaluation system, and uses that evidence to guide improvement activity or in a few cases dismissal. Focusing on improving instruction in this way raises some big questions.

• How do we exactly gather measures on teacher performance, as part of these policies? What measures, collected how often, capture the teachers’ work, and render it in a form that can support meaningful feedback to the teacher?
• How do these policy strategies balance between summative and formative evaluation purposes, and how are teachers likely to respond?
• What evidence is there that policies focused on performance evaluation achieve their intended purpose? For example, can evaluation collect useful information about instruction and provide feedback to teachers?
To answer these questions, we will revisit the MET project reports (read in Week 3), as well as consider other empirical work that has systematically studied the effects of teacher evaluation systems. As we do so, we will consider the potential impacts of teacher evaluation on teaching practice and on student learning outcomes.

**Main readings:**


3. Re-read: (a) MET project (2013). *Gathering feedback for teaching*, and (b) MET project (2014). *Ensuring fair and reliable measures of effective teaching: culminating findings from the MET project’s three-year study.* [Full citations in Week 3]

**Optional readings:**


**Week 8 (5/20). Teacher Development Strategies (I): Policies Aimed at Pre-Service Teacher Preparation**

Holding teachers accountable for student learning outcomes is one way of incentivizing teachers, and engaging them in a regular evaluation system that provides formative and summative feedback to them about their work offers a parallel set of inputs and supports for improving their teaching practice. Equally, if not more importantly, developing teachers’ capacity to do so has been always in the center of policy debates, in particular, teacher development at the front-end of a teaching career, through a traditional or alternative teacher preparation program experiences, and once on the job, through a variety of in-service professional development experiences. Many policy initiatives focus directly on one or the other of these.

In this class, we will focus on policies related to pre-service teacher preparation (in-service professional development policies will be a focus of the Week 9 class). Agencies at all levels (e.g., federal, states, districts, and schools) have invested heavily in teacher preparation programs. The pay-off of these investments is in much dispute, as are the actual mechanisms by
which these experiences actually shape teaching practice on the job. To explore these matters, we will be asking the following questions:

- What is the logic of teacher preparation programs, regarding the ways they may shape teaching and learning in the classrooms of credentialed teachers? How do traditional and “alternative route” program purport to shape teaching and learning in the classroom? What are the most important differences in their “theories of action”?
- In what ways do governmental policies seek to shape or incentivize the pre-service preparation of teachers?
- What evidence is there that these efforts work, if at all? Why or why not? Are some approaches to teacher preparation more promising than others? What issues of measurement and/or analysis do such inquiry efforts raise?

**Main reading:**


**Optional Readings**

To be announced.

**Assignment due: Second installment of Course project.**

**Week 9 (5/27)— Teacher Development Strategies (II): Policies Aimed At In-Service Professional Development**

After entering the teaching profession, teachers need supports to continue to learn and grow, and some people would argue that the primary professional learning that teachers do happens on the job, through a combination of experience, informal modeling by and observation of others, and more formal professional development experiences of various kinds. Almost all schools, districts, and states use professional development as an strategy for improving teaching and supporting the implementation of ambitious educational reforms (e.g., Common Core State Standards, Teacher evaluation). In many such efforts, in-service professional development constitutes the central policy lever seeking to enhance teachers’ skills, knowledge, and commitment to improve their levels of professional practice. These policies raise important questions:

- Through what logic and means do policies aimed at in-service professional development purport to reach and improve the instructional core?
• What issues for measurement and inquiry do such policies raise?
• How effective are these programs at improving teaching and learning, based on available evidence? What are effective features of these programs?

Main readings:


Optional readings:

Week 10 (6/3)—Strategies Aimed at Enhancing Curriculum and Standards

While the many policies reviewed in the last four weeks aim directly at teacher, others target a different part of the instructional core: the nature of what is taught. Either by promulgating learning standards or by targeting curriculum, these policies seek to change teaching and learning by anchoring teachers’ work to a compelling vision of what is to be learned—and often along with this emphasis, providing other supports or incentives that will encourage the new content to be taught. Common Core of State Standards (CCSS) is probably one of most popular reforms in these days and quite politically controversial. One motivation for CCSS is to address the issue of fragmented curriculum across grades and schools. Another motivation is to give every child an equal chance to have access to rigorous curriculum and ambitious goals of learning.

Using CCSS as a case in point, we will discuss the rationale for supporting such a policy, and explore the mechanisms by which it purports to reach and improve the instructional core. So far, there is little sound empirical evidence that examines the impact of such a policy on instruction, although some evidence over time can help us predict how a curriculum-focused improvement policy might bring about changes in teaching and learning (e.g., the latest findings of a study on Michigan Merit Curriculum, a curriculum policy applied to Michigan high schools, which can help us anticipate intended and unintended consequences of CCSS). With this class of policies in mind, we ask the following questions:
• How do policies aimed at learning standards and/or curriculum purport to affect the instructional core?
• What measurement and analytic issues do such policies raise for inquiry and analysis?
• What evidence to date suggests the degree and nature of their impacts on teaching practice or student learning? What further evidence would we
need to more fully understand the potential of such policies to contribute to improved teaching and learning?

Main reading:


Optional readings:


Week 11 (6/10)—Wrap Up: Reflecting on these and Alternative Strategies and Ways to Further Understand Policies Aimed at Teaching and Learning

We will use the last week to sum up this quarter’s discussion. If we have time, we will briefly introduce evidence on other popular policy initiatives, such as expanding the use of technology in classrooms and extending school days. Although we may not have time to discuss each interesting policy intervention, we will review the basic conceptual framework, logic of thinking, and instruments and tools collecting evidence on the impact of a particular policy on teaching and learning, noting further work ahead for the field—and perhaps for you as well. We will also use the time to evaluate the course and debrief on your learning experience.

Assignment due: Final installment of Course project.
Grades: Final Course Paper

Name: _________________________________

This part of your quarter's work will be graded using an incremental scale as described below. Work that does not meet the "adequate minimum" level will be returned for a rewrite. Everything that reached the adequate minimum level = at least 3.0. Increments will be added to that amount to reflect demonstrated proficiency above the minimum level on the five criteria indicated below:

_____ Adequate minimum = 3.0
(clearly expressed, coherent organization, reasonable approach to the final paper option, responsiveness to assignment, etc.)

_____ Quality and specificity of the discussion and critique of the policy logic and theory of action (up to +.3) + _____
(e.g., constructive tone and approach to the analysis task; specificity of the analysis, referencing key features, details, and assumptions (e.g., as embodied in the underlying theory of action), ability to set aside personal opinion; explicit reference to standards or criteria for a “good” policy research study)

_____ Explicit attention to analytic framework, methods, and empirical results (if available) (up to +.3) + _____
(e.g., analysis of policy issues or methods is grounded in coherent framework, with attention, as appropriate, to methods of inquiry and the quality of empirical results)

_____ Grounding in relevant literature (up to +.3) + _____
(drawing on both assigned Readings and other literature, as appropriate; Note: quantity is not what matters; relevance and centrality to the argument does. Paper also avoids use of literature as “window dressing”)

_____ Excellent written expression (up to +.1) + _____
(e.g., efficient, mechanically sound composition, paragraphing, etc.)

TOTAL: _________________
POSSIBILITY OF IMPROVING GRADES: If you wish to improve your grade, you may do a rewrite, providing this reached us before the close of the quarter. In that case, the new grades will simply replace the grades on this sheet.