How can Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) inform the study of global education policies?

*Draft paper prepared for presentation at the International Conference on Public Policy ICPP4 - MONTREAL 2019, June 26th-June 28th, 2019. Please do not cite without authors’ permission*

Nevbahar Ertas  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science and Public Administration  
University of Alabama at Birmingham  
Heritage Hall Building 406  
Phone: 205-934-8671  
E-mail: nevbahar@uab.edu

Andrew McKnight  
Associate Professor  
Educational Foundations  
University of Alabama at Birmingham  
Education Building 222  
Phone: 205-934-6232  
E-mail: anmcknig@uab.edu
Abstract

While the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is adopted rapidly by scholars focusing on both US-centric and international policy issues, there is only a handful of NPF applications in the educational policy domain. Most education reform policies are too conceptually diverse and culturally complicated, and the rhetoric used to support proposals concerning perceived educational issues like student performance, teacher quality, or fiscal responsibility are various. Furthermore, education policy scholars come from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds. Yet, we need precise language and clear theory to describe assumptions and goals of education policies, to identify the coalitions in the policy subsystems that formulate such policies, and the strategies used to promote policy solutions.

This is a theoretical paper that lays the groundwork for scholars interested in developing and conducting micro, meso, and macro level NPF studies in the education domain. In order to open channels of communication across education scholarship from different perspectives and backgrounds, a theoretical approach focusing on narratives may provide conceptual clarity to analyze the role of the numerous elements that shape policy. In line with this goal, first, the paper discusses why education policy applications of NPF are rare. Second, the paper reviews the assumptions and propositions of the theoretical framework and summarizes existing research literature on their education policy applications. Finally, the paper explores the vocabulary and the theoretical insights offered by the NPF to pose alternative questions to study global education policies, and, using a policy examples regarding market control of education, demonstrates potential avenues of NPF applications.
Introduction

The aim of this paper is to lay out the groundwork for scholars interested in developing and conducting micro, meso, or macro level Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) studies in the education domain. The NPF provides a fitting lens through which to apply a narrative perspective to the study of education policy, because debates in this policy domain are increasingly dominated by polarizing emotional narratives. In their book *Political spectacle and the fate of American schools*, education scholars Mary Lee Smith and colleagues (2004) likened the politics of educational policy to a political spectacle, “with directors, stages, cast of actors, narrative plots, and a curtain that separates the action on stage—what the audience has access to—from the backstage, where the real ‘allocation of values’ takes place” (Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004, p. 11). Educators, policy makers, and advocates and skeptics of various policies disagree about numerous education policy issues including the very purpose of education, the nature of problems in the education system, and the solutions to those problems. This disagreement often plays out as an ideological conflict between starkly divided groups that use carefully crafted narrative stories based on emotion and selective evidence (Henig 2008).

Still, education policy research literature is dominated by empirical analysis of student and school outcomes, and narrative inquiry in education typically refers to the study of experience, by means of personal stories by students, teachers, and similar (Clandinin & Huber, 2009). Those who study the interactions between education policy and politics include scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical perspectives, and they have long
reflected on policy narratives and provided crucial insight into their influence on the policy process, reflecting these scholarly traditions. We contend that a policy-analytic perspective such as the NPF has a lot to contribute to this literature at the intersection of education policy and politics, and might offer conceptual clarity and opening of channels of communication across disciplinary boundaries.

Assumptions and propositions of the NPF theoretical framework

The earlier edition of the seminal policy process theory book, *Theories of the Policy Process* (i.e., Sabatier, 1999) drew criticism from European scholars for not including any post-positivist scholarship on socially constructed policy narratives (Dudley, 2000; Parsons, 2000). Constructivist policy process scholars of the time (e.g., Fischer & Forrester, 1993) were emphasizing the need for intersubjective meaning-making processes and interpretive frameworks to understand the policy process. According to Sabatier, post-positivist theories were excluded, because they were “not clear enough to be proven wrong” (1999, p. 5). Consequently, narratives have long been exclusively studied by constructivist and interpretivist policy scholars, until Michael Jones and Marck McBeth (2010) proposed the Narrative Policy Framework as a “theoretically driven approach to narrative that is both empirical and falsifiable” (p. 331). NPF hopes to reconcile structural and post-structural policy scholarship on narratives, since narratives are seen both as social constructions and also as containing common structural elements that can be observed and studied empirically (Shanahan, et al., 2018, p.174). In other words, the developers of the theory claim that it is the type of narrative scholarship that is ‘clear enough to be wrong’.
For a new theory, NPF has been adopted widely by a community of scholars and has also been included in the most recent editions of the *Theories of the Policy Process*. Current NPF applications either examine the role of narratives in the policy process or a policy issue through narrative strategies (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018). The assumptions and postulates of the NPF has also been refined since its introduction. Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2018) listed five core assumptions for those interested in applying the framework: A story telling model of individual (i.e., *homo narrans*); policy realities as social constructions; shaped by predictable factors; common structural elements in all policy narratives; and three interacting levels of analysis. Structural elements and levels of analysis need to be identified to clarify what policy narratives are according to NPF.

According to NPF, a policy narrative has common and generalizable structural elements in the form of “setting, characters, plot, and moral(s)” that differentiate them from other texts or communications (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radaelli, 2018, p. 176). These structural form elements are identifiable across policy domains, and presumed to be shaped by similar factors. In other words, while content would vary across narratives about different policy issues such as environmental conservation, gun control, or schooling, scholars should be able to operationalize NPF-related variables (setting, characters, plot, and moral) and systematically investigate the factors that influence variation, such as narrative strategies or policy beliefs. These characteristics distinguish the NPF from other narrative approaches focusing on policy. Setting specifies context, space, and time of the story; characters typically include heroes, villains, and victims; plot is used to refer to the story line; and the moral of the story is typically the endorsed policy solution or the main takeaway.
The NPF also proposes three interacting levels of analysis—micro, meso, and macro—to study narratives. Micro-level analyses focus on the influence of narratives on individuals. Current micro-level NPF scholarship examined whether congruence or incongruence between the narrative and individuals’ belief systems, issue familiarity, narrator trust, or the power of characters influence individual-level policy preferences and persuasion. These studies typically rely on survey or observational data. The meso-level analysis focuses on construction and use of narratives by advocacy coalitions within policy subsystems. Current meso-level scholarship examined narrative strategies, especially expansion or containment of policy issues and use of devil or angel shift by coalitions on the losing or winning side, the relationship between coalition strength and policy outcomes, and dominance of policy actors who use evocative narratives over those who use technical or scientific information. The typical meso-level methodology is content analysis of a variety of narrative data in the form of texts, speeches, videos, and more recently digital media. Several other meso-level hypotheses are developed, but have not yet been tested. These include relationships between narrative elements and policy learning, the role of media actors, and the influence of customization of frames and elements for policy audiences (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radaelli, 2018, p. 192).

Finally, the macro-level analysis refers to ‘grand’ or ‘master’ or ‘meta’ institutional or cultural narratives, tracking the ways in which these grand narratives change over time, and their influence on policy formulation and policy change as a result (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radaelli, 2018). Macro-level is the least developed of the three and the object of macro-level analysis is rather imprecise. This is not surprising because over time these macro narratives become all-encompassing structures through which we organize experience and knowledge.
They blend into the background, making them invisible. Revealing the outlines of such a grand narrative construction as it applies to a policy domain requires a theoretical and historical scholarly perspective. Even though the framework envisions that the micro and meso-level policy debates take place within grand narratives and NPF theorists encourage exploration of the nature of the narrative linkages between levels of analysis, a macro-level perspective is certainly lacking in all policy domains. The existing discussion in the foundational texts is also admittedly brief. Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, and Radaelli (2018) advise importing from suitable theories that refer to large scale narratives as a starting point. Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2018) suggest using historical events, historic debates, and cultural frames to uncover and describe the macro narrative. So in order to be able to show how narratives simultaneously operate at each level, the very first task is identification and description of such grand narratives.

Our recommendation is to turn to the policy historians and foundational theorists. A historical perspective contextualized to the specific policy issue under study may improve the understanding of contemporary issues, as well as the institutional history and cultural norms that permeate the policy debate. Such grand narratives are plentiful in educational history literature. In fact, NPF theorists Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, and Radaelli (2018) borrowed the definition for macro level narrative from educational historian Scot Danforth (2016) in their NPF chapter on the *Theories of Policy Process*. According to Danforth (2016), the broad narratives of educational policy—macro-narratives as conceptualized in NPF— are “communal, historical narratives that are expansive enough to explain a variety of human events across time and place” (p. 584). In this particular study, he clarifies the primary policy narratives informing and
guiding ‘inclusive education’ in the USA—social justice vs. technocracy—, by providing a historical and contextual analysis. Later in the paper, we will offer other examples from the education policy domain under our case example. In the future, we hope to see more policy process scholars taking the lead on illuminating grand narratives for other policy areas and issues, so that the dynamic nature of the framework can be studied and refined further.

**Why education policy applications of NPF are rare?**

Scholars focusing on policy narratives about both US-centric and international policy issues have adopted NPF rapidly. Although a young research program and not without its critics, the NPF approach proved to be an important contribution to policy studies, as it is embraced by both neo-positivist and post-positivist and interpretivist policy research communities (Smith & Larimer, 2017). Despite this proliferation of research applications, there is only a handful of NPF applications in the educational policy domain. The edited volume of NPF applications, *The Science of Stories: Applications of the Narrative Policy Framework in Public Policy Analysis* published in 2014 (Jones, Shanahan, & McBeth, 2014), and a special issue within the Policy Studies Journal (PSJ) in 2018, a collection of NPF applications from various policy areas (Jones, 2018), do not contain a single application of NPF to an education policy issue. The reasons for a paucity of NPF applications in this policy domain could be explained by a number of factors.

First, the framework is quite new. The developers of the framework have extensive expertise and active research agendas in environmental policy domain. Furthermore, it is often postulated that the advocacy coalitions create or promote policy narratives within policy sub-
systems. Advocacy coalitions and policy subsystems are concepts from the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), another theory of the policy process developed by Paul A. Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith (1993). The ACF scholarship also has foundations in environmental and energy policy. Therefore, perhaps it is natural to observe a larger number of studies focusing in the environmental policy domain in this initial phase of NPF scholarship.

Second, most education reform policies are too conceptually diverse and culturally complicated, and the rhetoric used to support proposals concerning perceived educational issues like student performance, teacher quality, or fiscal responsibility are various. Furthermore, rhetoric and reality often do not match and sometimes contextual differences in the policy environment produce varied justifications for similar policies across geographies.

Third, education policy scholars come from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds including education, economics, political science, and public administration, sociology, and policy studies. As such, their research are often shaped by methodological traditions and big questions in their discipline. For example, economists often focus on the financing and provision of education, education-workforce relationship, and efficiency of educational programs and policies. Sociologists often study the interactions between systems and institutions and education and educational outcomes. Political scientists and public administration scholars focus on the distribution of power in the educational policy decision-making process, and the organization and governance of public school systems. Moreover, existing reviews shows that those conducting education research are a tiny fraction of each discipline’s literature and these authors often turn to multidisciplinary education journals as outlets for their scholarship (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Orr, 2004; Raffel, 2007). Consequently,
scholars interested in education policy and policy narratives are even a smaller subset of those conducting education research and those that are interested in the study of narratives may not be familiar with policy process theories.

If its brief history and lack of familiarity are culprits in scarcity of research, introducing the vocabulary and the theoretical insights offered by the NPF and posing potential questions to study global education policies might inspire further NPF applications in the education policy domain. As a policy process approach, NPF emphasize political decision-making and policy actors in the policymaking process. The literature at the intersection of education policy and politics has already provided a great deal of insight on the components of policy process such as problem definitions, agenda setting, policy legitimation, policy adoption, and policy implementation in educational policymaking. In addition, qualitative and quantitative narrative findings across an array of academic subfields has generated a promising theoretical foundation to think about ‘policy’ narratives. Yet, we need precise language and clear theory to describe assumptions and goals of education policies and the strategies used to promote policy solutions. There are a lot of questions to be answered by scholars who are interested in the study of narratives at the intersection of education policy and politics. NPF may supply more precise language and clear theory to guide this type of policy-analytic research.

**Existing research literature on education policy applications**

NPF applications are fewer, but growing rapidly. We conducted a search for the keyword ‘Narrative Policy Framework’ on Academic OneFile and PAIS Index databases that specialize in public affairs, public and social policies, and international relations, ERIC
database that specialize in literature on education, and google scholar. The search generated 40 peer-reviewed publications between 2010 and 2018. Of these, 11 were theoretical pieces or review articles that discuss several theories of the policy process. To count NPF applications, only studies that use the NPF framework as one of their primary lenses for conducting the research are counted. Table 1 provides a list of NPF applications in education policy domain by year.

Table 1 NPF research in education policy domain, 2010-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Other NPF relevant scholarship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The environmental policy domain dominates the NPF applications. Among 29 applications, only 5 were related to educational policy. Three applications focus on policy in the United States, one application on policy in Canada, and one application is about an education policy in Switzerland. Ertas (2015) examined whether and how different policy narratives on charter schools influence opinions and policy preferences regarding charter schools. Bragg and Soler (2017) analyzed the perspectives of community college personnel, university personnel, employers, and students towards Applied Baccalaureate (AB) degrees in the US. McGough, Bedell, and Tinkler (2018) examined the narratives that shaped the assessment of teacher licensure in the state of Vermont. Pinto (2013) analyzed the influence of two policy narratives on financial literacy education policy in Canada. Schlauefer (2018) studied how competing coalitions in Swiss direct-democratic campaigns on school policy use the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluations.

---

1 Table 1 also includes a conference paper (Veselkova & Beblavy, 2014) that was discussed in the NPF chapter of the *Theories of the Policy Process* book. Veselkova and Beblavy (2014) focused on grand historical educational narratives within OECD and its influence on schooling in Czech Republic and Slovakia. In addition, the article by Danforth (2018), which is used by NPF theorist to explain grand narratives and two ongoing projects by the authors are listed under other relevant scholarship.
Potential avenues for NPF applications in education policy

In this section, we will use the vocabulary and the theoretical insights offered by the NPF to pose questions to study global education policies. According to Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2018, pp. 333-334), existing NPF literature contains policy-centered NPF questions (i.e., “the policy process of a policy issue through narrative elements and strategies”) and theory-centered NPF questions (i.e., “the role of narratives in the policy process”). We developed mostly policy-centered NPF questions by using a policy example regarding market control of education to demonstrate potential avenues for NPF applications. Table 2 summarizes generic NPF questions by level of analysis and our policy specific example. We began by generic questions formulated by Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2018). Again, the macro-level analysis focuses on the institutions and the culture (e.g., “What are the conditions under which macro level narratives develop and change?”; Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018, p. 334). The meso-level analysis focuses on the group (e.g., “How do interest groups or advocacy coalitions construct and use policy narratives?”; Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018, p. 334); and the micro-level analysis focuses on the individual (e.g., “What influence do narratives have on individual preferences ... or decision making?”; Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018, p. 334). Our discussion starts with macro level and poses additional research questions, both generic and case specific. The fact that the macro-level NPF work is the most ignored level of analysis in the literature is unfortunate, because once the grand narratives are clear, it is easier to clarify narrative expectations at the group and individual
level and to formulate clearer hypotheses to further our understanding of the policy narrative in the policy process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of analysis</th>
<th>Generic research question</th>
<th>Policy example: Market control of education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>What are grand narratives in the policy domain?</td>
<td>What are the narratives about the extent and magnitude of the problems in the K-12 education system in the US?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are the grand narratives about the policy issue?</td>
<td>What are the primary policy narratives informing and guiding ‘teacher certification requirements’ in the USA?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which underlying social and political values are reflected in the policy narratives?</td>
<td>What are the social and political values and desired goals articulated in these narratives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What are the conditions under which macro level narratives develop and change?” (Shanahan, Jones, &amp; McBeth, 2018, p.334)</td>
<td>Which contextual and historical events explain how the teacher certification requirements have changed over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meso</td>
<td>“How do groups construct policy narratives?” (Shanahan, Jones, &amp; McBeth, 2018, p.334)</td>
<td>How do narrative strategies differ between policy groups who support and oppose alternative teaching certification?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are the main narrative strategies (e.g., scope of conflict, causal mechanisms, or the devil-shift) used by groups in policy subsystem?</td>
<td>How do these groups portray the victims, villains, and heroes and causal mechanisms in the stories they tell to support and oppose alternative teaching certification? Do they emphasize, understate, or customize narrative elements for different audiences or platforms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which elements of policy narratives resonate with which belief systems?</td>
<td>During the debates about whether or not to contract with Teach For America (TFA), how were expert and other types of narratives deployed and how did they affect independent school districts’ votes? Are there discernible differences across cases?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What is the effect of policy narratives in the policy process?” (Shanahan, Jones, &amp; McBeth, 2018, p.334)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“How do narrative components explain X phenomenon in one case or across multiple cases?” (Shanahan, Jones, &amp; McBeth, 2018, p.338)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro</td>
<td>Do different policy narratives on alternative teaching certification influence individual opinions and policy beliefs regarding TFA?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the effect of “accidental, mechanical, intentional, or inadvertent” causal mechanisms on an individual’s policy opinions? (Stone, 1989). For example, TFA as “the face of corporate big money groups dismantling public education” or “well-meaning and dedicated TFA recruits being dropped into classrooms unprepared and unsupported” (Greene, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does congruence or incongruence between the narrative and individual’s belief systems influence preferences? For example, are those with higher levels of support for economic individualism more likely to respond to narratives that activate such frames as opposed to narratives that activate a public values framework?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does narrative effects on policy preferences differ when the issue is alternative teaching certification or TFA?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does narrative effects on policy preferences about alternative teaching certification persist after controlling for issue specific factors or across settings? Do they operate in different ways for different groups?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does narrative effects persist across states or countries that experiment with alternative teaching certification?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors added generic and case specific research questions to the ones formulated by (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018).
**Macro-level NPF**

In order to identify the conditions under which macro level narratives develop and change, we need to flesh out those grand stories first. Therefore, we began by asking what the grand narratives are in the policy domain and about the policy issue. This is no easy task, because these grand stories transform into mores and norms of a particular culture and setting. The shared expectations turn into shared behaviors amongst members of a societal group, and consequently shape every facet of life, including the policy environment. Policy legitimation is often accomplished by a political and cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony, a term developed by Antonio Gramsci, the famous Italian Marxist philosopher and political theorist in 1930s, refer to the use of ideological or cultural means to justify the social, political, and economic status quo as natural and inevitable in a given society. This legitimation is usually achieved though dominant institutions, which play a critical role in producing and reproducing a cultural reality and the prevailing stories about the values, norms, and expectations regarding just and unjust, and possible and impossible. Media and culture scholar Stephen Duncombe wrote about Gramsci’s theory as it relates to the power of dominant ideas on our thinking:

> The power of cultural hegemony lies in its invisibility. Unlike a soldier with a gun or a political system backed up by a written constitution, culture resides within us. It doesn’t seem “political,” it’s just what we like, or what we think is beautiful, or what feels comfortable. Wrapped in stories and images and figures of speech, culture is a politics that doesn’t look like politics and is therefore a lot harder to notice, much less resist. When a culture becomes hegemonic, it becomes “common sense”² for the majority of the population (Duncombe, 2012).

---

² In opposition to Gramsci’s notion of “good sense” being preferable to “common sense.”
In other words, the challenge is to be able to demonstrate the outlines of narrative social constructs that appear to be natural, perpetual, and valuable in a society. Therefore we also asked: Which underlying social and political values are reflected in the policy narratives?

The grand narratives in the *policy domain* and about the *policy issue* would undoubtedly be connected, so NPF applications would probably need to clarify these linkages for the policy under investigation. Our example focuses on *conceptualization of problems in the education system* as an example of grand narrative in the policy domain, *alternative teaching certification* as the specific policy idea, and *Teach for America program* as the context-specific policy application. What are grand narratives in the policy domain? If policies are solutions to perceived problems, what is the problem regarding education? Table 2 presents a context–specific example: What are the narratives about the extent and magnitude of the problems in the K12 education system in the US? Please note that the emphasis could vary when posing this type of a grand narrative question. While this one focuses on the ‘problem’ in the US K12 context, similar questions could be posed to probe purpose rather than problem, or how the problems are perceived in higher education, or in another other country.

These grand narratives have long been the subject of study for historians of education specializing in the relationship between education and society and educational theorists specializing in education and power, and cultural politics (e.g., Labaree, 1997; 2011; 2014; 2017 or Apple, 1996; 2012; 2013, 2017 for the US context). Critical policy analysis scholarship in education also contains insights into the discursive foundations of various education policy decisions. In the US context, the problems with K-12 schools have been
narrated and perceived along the lines of an ineptitude vs. inequity storyline (Schneider, 2011). Especially focusing on reforms after the 1990s, emphasis on education governance have taken center stage in reform efforts. According to one line of thought (let’s call it the ineptitude story line), rules, and regulations around school systems are excessive, rigid, and damaging to the autonomy of teachers and principals, obstruct innovation, and reduce responsiveness (Chubb & Moe, 1990). In other words, the root of the problem is democratic control of schools. The centralized and bureaucratic nature of government run schools allows them to be responsive to constituents, not consumers (i.e., parents), so educational performance have suffered as a result (Chubb & Moe, 1990). This canon, often used by public choice theorists who primarily rely on economic tools for analyzing political behavior and institutions, turns again to private markets for finding solutions to problems in education (Friedman, 1997). The argument goes like this: Businesses are innovative and responsive to their clients because they operate in the marketplace and are not subject to the bureaucratic burdens, so to fix schools, the current system should be torn down and rebuilt into a competitive market (Schneider, 2016). Consequently, the policy solutions included strategies to introduce competition, and to remove or circumvent rules and regulations, e.g. charter schools, private school vouchers, weakening of teacher unions and the protections, rights, and wages that they secure, and the transfer of professional teacher training and preparation to private actors.

According to the other line of thought (i.e., inequity narrative), the main problems in the education system is funding inequities among schools or broader socio-economic problems in the communities the schools serve, not the bureaucratic nature of education.
institutions (Smith, & Meier, 1994). It has often been argued that the ‘crisis’ language is overstating the problem and deployed strategically to manipulate policy decisions (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Schneider, 2011). Furthermore, these scholars caution that radical changes in the institutions that govern education without sufficient evidence would deepen inequities and create risks (Fiske & Ladd, 2001; Krueger, 1998). There are wide disparities in funding levels among states in the US, as well as among school districts in each state (Bakers et al. 2016). Furthermore, school funding fairness and other indicators of education quality such as access to early education, teacher wages, and teacher-pupil ratios are found to be correlated (Bakers et al. 2016). In other words, this perspective sees the solution in fixing these entrenched inequities in school funding and larger policy initiatives that target working adults and families such as changes in tax structures or widespread access to resources like child care and early childhood education.

There are also side-narratives and meta-narratives that work with these grand narratives of conceptualization of problems in the education system. For example, in the US, there have been a long rhetorical (and empirical) debate on whether funding have any effect on educational quality. This issue has generated considerable controversy among researchers and increasing numbers of politicians and education reformers have adopted the position that money does not matter in education (Baker, 2012; Bjorklund-Young, 2017). This line of reasoning is linked to the larger debate regarding governance ineptitude versus inequity. If the problem is money, one would expect to observe a correlation between increased funding and educational quality. If the problem is governance and government control of school, one would expect to observe no relationship. In fact, when literature and
media coverage is surveyed, the narrators seem to align themselves on both issues as expected. As an example of meta-narratives, an obvious theory is that of neoliberalism. Scholars from various disciplines have described in detail how the current economic, political, and social structures around the world are being shaped by concerted efforts of transnational corporate interests and their stakeholders in the last few decades. This transformation is often characterized by extensive financialization and privatization, austerity measures to reduce government spending, regressive tax systems, and deregulation (Carroll & Sapinski, 2016; Duménil & Lévy, 2004; Harvey, 2007). Critical education scholars have not overlooked that these economic policies are legitimized by a political and cultural hegemony of individualism, consumption, and market fundamentalism that has shape the basic ways we think about the institution of education (Apple, 2017). David Harvey (2007) refers to this political project as Neoliberalism. This transformation has also been argued to have a global nature with increasing number of supranational players promoting similar market-based policies, using similar ideological positions (Verger, 2014).

Critical education scholars have identified the common themes — of funding cuts, privatization, and deregulation — across ‘neoliberal’ global education reform policies. This results in different policy applications, for example replacement of state funding in higher education toward privatized financialization and policies that lead to increases in student debt burden (Giroux, 2014); funding cuts for public schools and privatization of public education systems3 (Ball, 2012; Ndimande & Lubienski, 2017; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010); and

3 This option includes a variety of routes from the completely private voucher system in Chile to the public–private hybrid charter schools in the US.
policies that target teachers, typically weakening teacher unions or public investment in teacher education. One such policy option is to promote transfer of professional teacher training and preparation to private actors (Weiner & Compton, 2008). Does this type of policy represent a ‘neoliberal’ attempt to weaken teacher unions and public investment in teacher education or does it infuse ‘innovation’, and ‘flexibility’ to ‘an unresponsive bureaucracy’?

**Meso-level NPF**

One specific application of this option, which we also used as our specific policy case, is the Teach for America (TFA) program in the US. The idea, to train and place elite college graduates in teaching positions in needy areas of the country, was first conceived by a senior at Princeton University in 1988. The program grew rapidly from idea to operation. “By 2008, TFA was raising $100 million a year and had 6,000 corps members teaching more than 400,000 students across the United States” (Larabee, 2010, p. 48). It has gained accolades from famous op-ed writers such as Milton Friedman and David Brooks, corporate executives, various foundations, and political leaders including president Obama. Modeling itself on the Peace Corps, TFA positioned itself as a social justice project and made an idealistic appeal to new college graduates by asking them to make a 2-year commitment to serve. One promotional brochure from 2009 was titled “Teach for Solving Our Nation’s Greatest Injustice” (TFA Brochure, 2009). This appeal has resonated with many young people.
At the beginning, the only critique seem to be coming from traditional teacher education programs within schools of education and teacher unions. Traditional teacher certification is a lengthy commitment that involves study of pedagogical theory, social and psychological foundations, teacher inquiry, the politics, history, and sociology of education, classroom practice, fieldwork, and observation (Bergerson, 2016). In contrast, TFA training is typically 5 to 8 weeks. Consequently, the education community was concerned about the de-professionalization of the profession. As the program reached its 25th year, the number and variety of its critics have grown, including its own alumni (Greene, 2016). An edited book, titled Teach for America Counter-Narratives, feature twenty critical essays by TFA alumni (Brewer & De Marrais, 2015). The extent of critique have also widened to include various issues such as lack of preparation, lack of support, subsequent depression and fatigue of recruits, displacement of career teachers, suppression of teacher wages, denial of resources to low-income and minority communities (by forcing inexperienced teachers into these communities), association with zero-tolerance or no-excuses approach, infusion of corporate money into operations, alliances with other actors involved in education privatization and corporate reform, alternate motives of some to use TFA experience as a step to lucrative and political careers, and even ‘indoctrination’ students and recruits by ‘neoliberal’ ideology, and ‘epistemological racism’ (Barnes, Germain, & Valenzuela, 2016; Bergerson, 2016; Brewer & De Marrais, 2015).

Earlier we suggested that the grand narratives in the policy domain, the specific policy idea, and the context-specific policy application would work in tandem. So we expect that the grand narratives in the education policy domain, the narratives about the
alternative teacher certification, and the narratives about Teach for America (TFA) to be associated, so meso-level NPF applications that clarify these linkages would be most welcome. Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth (2018) pose the following as the first main meso-level question: “How do groups construct policy narratives?” (p.334). We added auxiliary questions that speak to narrative strategies (e.g, scope of conflict, causal mechanisms, or the devil-shift) and their relationship to belief systems. For example, how do narrative strategies differ between policy groups who support and oppose alternative teaching certification? How do these groups portray the victims, villains, and heroes and causal mechanisms in the stories they tell to support and oppose alternative teaching certification? Do they emphasize, understate, or customize narrative elements for different audiences or platforms?

These questions rely on obvious policy actors and their narratives (e.g., narratives by the TFA organization or teacher unions). There are various policy actors that work together to advance policy agendas. It is also possible to integrate narratives into the Advocacy Coalition Framework, by conducting research to clarify the principal and auxiliary coalition actors, policy brokers, and policy entrepreneurs in the policy subsystems that formulate and promote alternative teacher certification policies or refer to existing research that have done so for other education policy issues (see for example, Brecher, Brazill, Weitzman, & Silver, 2010; Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, Weible, & Sabatier, 2014; Kirst, 2007; Lugg & Robinson, 2009). This line of inquiry could be extended to investigate to what extent the coalition members overlap across policy domains and geographical contexts (e.g, do coalitions promoting charter schools, vouchers, and alternative teaching certification involve same policy actors? Are there connections between local, national, and global actors that endorse
or oppose alternative teaching certification policies?). Researchers can also take on the belief systems, which underlie social and political values are reflected in the policy narratives. (e.g., Is market superiority over state-run schools a core belief in policy subsystem promoting alternative teaching certification policies? Is it shared by all members of the advocacy coalition or is it a source of contention?). Finally, coalition resources and strategies especially as they relate to narrative production and promotion and how these factors explain differences in policy adoption and change by country, locality, or policy offer fruitful research avenues.

Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth (2018) also asked “What is the effect of policy narratives in the policy process?” (p. 334) and “How do narrative components explain X phenomenon in one case or across multiple cases?” (p. 338). Policy outcomes in the education domain are various. School board elections and school board votes have critical importance on many policy decisions. For example, in the case of TFA, Houston ISD (i.e., Independent school district) trustees recently voted to end the district’s contract with Teach For America (TFA) (Carpenter, 2019). The Teach For America contract renewal passed the previous year and similar voting would likely take place in other school districts. So, which stories were told by whom during the Houston TFA voting process or as phrased in the summary table: During the debates about whether or not to contract with Teach For America (TFA), how were expert and other types of narratives deployed and how did they affect independent school districts’ votes? Are there discernible differences across years or cases?

*Micro-level NPF*
The micro-level focus on individuals, so first: How do narratives influence individual preferences and decisions? For example, do different policy narratives on alternative teaching certification influence individual opinions and policy beliefs regarding TFA? Then, auxiliary questions follow to focus on narrative strategies (e.g., causal mechanisms or the devil-shift) on individual policy opinions. What is the effect of “accidental, mechanical, intentional, or inadvertent” causal mechanisms on an individual’s policy opinions? (Stone, 1989). For example, what is the influence of portraying the problem as the TFA being “the face of corporate big money groups dismantling public education” or the “well-meaning and dedicated TFA recruits being dropped into classrooms unprepared and unsupported” (Greene, 2016). Next, we introduced questions to investigate foundational hypotheses of micro NPF theory. How are these individual narrative effects mediated or moderated by congruity, narrative breach, or issue familiarity? Focusing on congruity-opinion relationship, one can ask whether congruence or incongruence between the narrative and individual’s belief systems influence preferences. For example, are those with higher levels of support for economic individualism more likely to respond to narratives that activate such frames as opposed to narratives that activate a public values framework?

We added two new questions that we believe would contribute to theory building. First has to do with separating policy narratives about policy ideas and specific policy applications. The second calls for careful consideration of controls. Zanocco, Geoboo, and Jones (2018) emphasized importance of controlling for other factors to isolate and ascertain narrative effects, if NPF research is to be not only ‘clear enough to be wrong’, but also “clear enough to say how much” and in “what manner” (p. 994). First, are narrative effects
consistent between abstract policy ideas and specific applications? For example, does narrative effects on policy preferences differ when the issue is alternative teaching certification or TFA? Second, does narrative effects persists after controlling for issue specific factors or across settings? Do they operate in different ways for different groups? Does narrative effects on policy preferences about alternative teaching certification persist after controlling for political ideology, parenthood, gender, and race? How do different types of narratives affect opinions of teachers or parents? Does narrative effects persists across states or countries that experiment with alternative teaching certification?

**Conclusion**

Education is central to human experience. The education policy domain contain rich and complicated policy stories concerning every stage of the policy process, the goals and ideals for the future, the nature of public and private goods, and the role of government in public service provisions. Yet, both overarching global changes and context-specific socio-cultural, historical, and political factors shape the policy reality and individual policy applications in different countries. Even within a single country, education policy is shaped by ‘a tense coalition of forces, some of whose aims partly contradict others’ (Apple, 2006, p. 49). We propose that applying a shared theoretical framework may clarify the similarities and differences in stakeholders, policy beliefs, and problem definitions, as well as the role of underlying social and political forces locally and globally.

Storytelling is as old as time. Critical deployment of policy stories shape how we think about problems of and solutions to our education systems. The NPF approach, whose central
The tenet is to understand the power of policy narratives, provides clear guidelines to decode policy stories, identify narrative strategies, and their influence, especially during critical junctures, on policy belief, learning, and change. The ways in which policy actors understand, portray, and categorize policy issues reveals the divide between perceived problems, evidence, and policy. Consequently, in order to understand and solve problems in education systems, the nature and quality of these frames should be scrutinized. So far, the substantive policy coverage in NPF has largely ignored education, yet there is much ground yet to be covered. It is our hope that more scholars of narratives, critical education, and politics of education take up the challenge to apply the NPF in education policy area.
References


