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## Policy Field and Policy Discourse: The American Federation for Children Network

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**Abstract:** This article presents findings from an analysis of the American Federation for Children Network (AFC) policy network using tools from network ethnography and qualitative content analysis. Specifically, we examined tax forms and carried out extensive web searches to spatialize and map the AFC network, mined text from policy-actors in the AFC network, and analyzed the policy discourse promoted by these network actors to achieve their political goals. The task for this study was to use AFC as a heuristic device to explore the complexity of the education policy field and to understand how network policy-actors work to achieve their policy goals through advocacy and marketing. Findings from the study indicate that the AFC network demonstrates a hierarchical ordering, this hierarchical ordering is reflective of the elite planning and social engineering associated with neoliberal reforms, and that the policy-actors in the AFC network employ discursive

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strategies to frame an elite political project to advance school choice policies as an anti-elite movement oriented toward political empowerment and educational justice.

**Keywords:** Policy Sociology; Network Analysis; Policy Networks; Policy Discourse

### **Política de educación y discurso político: The American Federation for Children redes**

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta los resultados de un análisis de la red política American Federation for Children Network (AFC) utilizando herramientas de red de la etnografía y análisis de contenido cualitativo. En concreto, examinamos formularios de impuestos y realizó extensas investigaciones en la web para espacializar y asignar la red AFC, texto extraído de políticos-actores en la red AFC, y analizados por el discurso político Promovido Estos actores de la red para alcanzar sus objetivos políticos. La tarea para este estudio fue utilizar el AFC como un dispositivo heurístico para explorar la complejidad de la política educativa y entender cómo los actores de política de red trabajan para alcanzar sus objetivos de política a través de la defensa y el marketing. Las conclusiones del estudio indican que la red AFC demuestra una ordenación jerárquica, esta ordenación jerárquica es el reflejo de la planificación de la elite y la ingeniería social asociadas a las reformas neoliberales, y que la política-actores al servicio de la red estrategias discursivas AFC para encuadrar un proyecto político élite para hacer avanzar las políticas de elección de la escuela como un movimiento político anti-elite orientado hacia la capacitación y la justicia educativa.

**Palabras clave:** Sociología política; Análisis de Redes; Redes de Políticas; Discurso Político

### **Política de educação e discurso político: The American Federation for Children redes**

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma análise da rede política American Federation for Children Network (AFC) utilizando ferramentas de rede da etnografia e análise de conteúdo qualitativa. Especificamente, nós examinamos formulários de impostos e realizou extensas pesquisas na web para espacializar e mapear a rede AFC, texto extraído de políticos-atores na rede AFC, e analisados pelo discurso político Promovido Estes atores da rede para atingir seus objetivos políticos. A tarefa para este estudo foi usar o AFC como um dispositivo heurístico para explorar a complexidade da política educacional e entender como os atores de política de rede trabalham para alcançar seus objetivos de política por meio de advocacy e marketing. Conclusões do estudo indicam que a rede AFC Demonstra uma ordenação hierárquica, esta ordenação hierárquica é o reflexo do planejamento elite e engenharia social associados às reformas neoliberais, e que a política-atores a serviço da rede estratégias discursivas AFC para enquadrar um projeto político elite para fazer avançar as políticas de escolha da escola como um movimento político anti-elite voltada para a capacitação e justiça educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Sociologia Política; Análise de Redes; Redes de Políticas; Discurso Político

## Introduction

One of the more significant transformations of the education policy field over the past four decades has been the “changing structure and function of the state in policy processes” (Hogan, 2016, p. 382). New actors working in complex networks of cooperation, competition, and exchange have gained entry to the education policy field and have transformed the policy-making process at the global, national, and local levels (Ball, 2009, 2012). In the United States, the education policy field is dominated by a new breed of entrepreneurial philanthropies and advocacy groups leveraging capital and managerial oversight to drive educational change (Au & Ferrare, 2014, 2015; Hess & Henig, 2015; Kovacs, 2010; Reckhow, 2012; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Saltman, 2010; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Zeichner & Pena-Sandoval, 2015) and by a growing number of think tanks producing partisan research on the effectiveness of education reform policies, frequently with funding from entrepreneurial philanthropies promoting the policies being evaluated (Debray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; McDonald, 2014; Rich, 2005).

The confirmation of Betsy DeVos as secretary of education in 2017 raised the profile of one of these new policy-actors: the American Federation for Children (AFC). AFC is a 501(c)(4) social welfare organization associated with the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization the Alliance for School Choice both of which receive funding from the Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation. DeVos was the chairperson of AFC before stepping down to become secretary of education. During her senate confirmation hearing, DeVos indicated that she and her family have contributed approximately \$200 million to conservative political causes over the years making the DeVos family significant players in the politics of the Republican Party (Alexander, 2017).

In the education policy field, AFC provided over \$7.7 million in funding for advocacy organizations, think tanks, and venture philanthropies between 2010-2015 to push for education reforms (Internal Revenue Service, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). This level of funding makes AFC a relatively minor player in the education policy field when compared to organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or the Walton Family Foundation. However, when considering the role that DeVos plays in Republican party politics in terms of funding, her role as secretary of education and the work of AFC’s sister organization the Alliance for School Choice, it is clear that the AFC is an important actor in the education policy field.

This article presents findings from an analysis of the AFC policy network using tools from network ethnography and qualitative content analysis. Specifically, we examined tax forms and carried out extensive web searches to spatialize and map the AFC network, mined text from policy-actors in the AFC network, and analyzed the policy discourse promoted by these network-actors to achieve their political goals. The task for this study was to use AFC as a heuristic device to explore the complexity of the education policy field and to understand how network policy-actors work to achieve their policy goals through advocacy and marketing. Findings from the study indicate that the AFC network demonstrates a hierarchical ordering, this hierarchical ordering is reflective of the elite planning and social engineering associated with neoliberal reforms<sup>1</sup>, and that the policy-actors in the AFC network employ discursive strategies to frame an elite political project to advance school choice policies as an anti-elite movement oriented toward political empowerment and educational justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism is a much used and much abused term that too often is employed as a pejorative substitute for reasoned analysis. As will be discussed later in the article, we draw upon the work of Philip Mirowski and the Foucaultian tradition to conceptualize neoliberalism as an elite political project of social engineering operating on global, national, and local scales. (See Foucault, 2008; Miller, 2010; Mirowski, 2009)

## Review of Relevant Literature

Stephen Ball's analytic and theoretical work in network governance has made significant contributions to the field of education policy sociology (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). Ball has made important contributions to the development of analytic tools to understand the emergence and proliferation of complex networks of policy-actors working outside, within, and across governmental structures, a mode of governance Ball (2009) has termed heterarchy as an organisational form somewhere between hierarchy and network which draws upon diverse horizontal and vertical links that permit different elements of the policy process to cooperate (and/or compete) while individually optimising different success criteria. That is, it replaces or combines bureaucracy and administrative structures and relationships with a system of organisation replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy and/or divergent-but-coexistent patterns of relation, which operates at and across 'levels' (local, sub-national, national and international; p. 689).

Heterarchical governance points toward the dynamic, shifting ensemble of network-actors and policy networks at work on the education policy field that, despite the diversity of and asymmetric power relations between network-actors, constitute a relatively stable policy community "based upon shared conceptions of social problems and their solutions" that are informed by a neoliberal shift toward economization and governmentality (Ball, 2012, pp. 3-6).

In the US, the education policy field is dominated by complex networks of private policy-actors working to advance neoliberal education reforms in predominantly urban school districts in the name of resolving historical inequality and achieving racial justice (Scott, 2013a; 2013b; 2009). New network policy-actors from business, entrepreneurial philanthropy, advocacy organizations, and think tanks have become the driving forces behind neoliberal reform policies that encourage the development of educational markets (Saltman, 2014) and subsume educational practice under a managerial logic of performance metrics, measurement, and surveillance (Clarke, 2004), policies Apple (2013) conceptualizes as conservative modernization. Entrepreneurial philanthropic organizations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, leverage strategic funding and managerial oversight to push education reform outside of formal mechanisms of democratic accountability (Au & Ferrare, 2014, 2015; Hess & Henig, 2015; Kovacs, 2010; Reckhow, 2012; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Saltman, 2010; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Zeichner & Pena-Sandoval, 2015). Think tanks that frequently receive funding from entrepreneurial philanthropies have effectively supplanted university-based scholarship in the production of educational policy research employed in the policy-making process, and think tank scholars frequently use their research to engage in media advocacy for neoliberal policies in popular political culture (McDonald, 2013, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Non-profit organizations such as Teach for America work with prominent charter school organizations like KIPP schools as an "incubator for personnel who go on to staff existing organizations, and for leaders who work to expand the network" (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014, p. 756) while other non-profits such as the American Legislative Exchange Council craft model legislation and work with state legislators to introduce and pass new laws that advance neoliberal reforms (Anderson & Donchik, 2016).

The growing body of literature on heterarchical governance contributes much to our understanding of the growing complexity and democratic deficit of the American education policy

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<sup>2</sup> Rich(2005) notes that one of the means by which think tanks measure success is through media exposure.

field. It orients the analytic focus of education policy sociology toward two inter-related tasks. First, it points toward the need to develop rigorous analytic tools to map and unpack the asymmetric, distributed power relations among the various network-actors at work within a policy network and among network-actors and networks on the policy field. Second, it points toward the need to develop analytic tools to understand the means by which network-actors work to shape policy formation and to build support for education reform in popular political culture. These new network-actors entering the education policy field bring a corporate sensibility to the policy-making process, and they employ tools developed in marketing and social scientific research to craft policy discourses that seek to shape “common sense” understandings of specific issues to advance their policy goals (Butler & Collins, 2011). The present study seeks to contribute to this emerging body of literature in education policy sociology by: mapping the AFC network and the policy field in which it operates, mining text from websites and promotional materials produced by policy-actors in the AFC network, and conducting a qualitative content analysis of the policy discourse produced by policy-actors in the AFC network to illuminate the discursive strategies they employ to build support for education reform in popular political culture and, ultimately, to achieve their policy goals.

## Methodology

We draw on Bourdieu’s (1989) field theory to conceptualize the policy landscape of the US as a national policy field made up of policy-actors possessing varying degrees and forms of capital with which to influence and promote education reform policies (Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005). “[A]n education policy field can be conceptualized as a structured space of elite network-actors from government, business, entrepreneurial philanthropy, think tanks, and policy institutes inhabiting a position of relative advantage in relation to non-elite policy actors, such as families, students and teachers, who perform and negotiate policy discourses in the struggle over the production and actualization of education policy” (Ellison & Aloe, 2018). In this study, we ask the following questions: Who are the policy-actors in the AFC network and how are they positioned on the policy field? How do policy-actors in the AFC network frame education reform policies? What discursive strategies do they employ to advance their policy goals? We answer these questions through two phases of inquiry.

The first phase of inquiry employed tools from network ethnography (Hogan, 2016; Howard, 2002) to investigate the landscape of the American education policy field. Specifically, we conducted a network analysis focused on AFC as its central node (Hogan, 2016, p. 386-387) in order to identify and establish connections between elite network policy-actors promoting choice school policies in the US. The network analysis sought to track funding, identify partnerships, and locate affiliated organizations in the AFC network using the following procedures. Primary data for the network analysis were collected through an examination of federal 990 tax forms submitted by the AFC and organizations in the AFC network between 2010 and 2015, and these data were supplemented by web searches to identify partnerships and affiliations between and among policy-actors.<sup>3</sup> The data were recorded in an adjacency matrix and mapped with Social Network Visualizer 2.2 (SNV 2.2) software. The maps were generated using a force-directed layout algorithm (Fruchterman-Reingold) in which nodal size is a function of the number of connections among actors and were edited for visual clarity using Inkscape 0.91 vector graphics software.<sup>4</sup> Two network maps were generated from the data. The first maps relationships between the 42 policy-actors in the AFC network (Figure 1). The second maps relationships among the 91 policy-actors in the

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<sup>3</sup> Data sources included news reports, organizational websites, and blog posts.

<sup>4</sup> Node size was not altered.

education policy field in which the AFC network is situated (Figure 2). A degree centrality report was generated using SNV 2.2 to quantify the number of edges attached to each of the ninety-one nodes in the expanded map of the AFC policy field (i.e., the higher the centrality score the larger the number of edges attached to the node). The centrality scores were plotted in a dot plot and a histogram, and the distribution of the data were then organized into quantiles (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup>

The second phase of inquiry employed tools from qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to explore the discursive strategies employed to promote school choice policies in the US. Specifically, we sought to identify the discursive strategies policy-actors in the AFC network employ to frame (Goffman, 1974) school choice and school choice policies. Entman (1993) describes framing as a discursive practice used to select and make salient some aspect of social reality by defining problems, establishing causes, making moral evaluations, and presenting remedies.

Frames, then, define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes – identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (p. 52, emphasis in original).

The focus on framing as a discursive strategy employed by network actors allows for an analysis of the “linguistic structuring” (Edelman, 2013) of educational policies that extends beyond traditional policy analyses focused on agenda setting, policy prescription, and evaluation. The task is to move beyond the identification of policy-actors and networks on the education policy field to the techniques these actors employ to build support for education reform and to achieve their policy goals.

Data for the analysis were gathered from exhaustive internet searches of the 42 policy-actors in the AFC network (Figure 1) between February 15th and March 7th of 2018. This search yielded data from 34 network-actors.<sup>6</sup> The following types of textual data were collected from network-actors’ websites: mission statements, official statements on political events and legislation, news and blog posts, parent testimonials, interviews, policy briefs, and research summaries.

Data were analyzed using tools from qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014; Schreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a systematic method that provides researchers with a flexible approach to structure qualitative data using a coding frame. For this study, we constructed four theory-driven coding frames (Schreier, 2012, pp. 84-85) informed by Entman’s (1993) frame theory: problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral judgment, and suggested remedies.

We began by reading through the data and making margin notes to identify and classify data into the four concepts informing each coding frame. Next, we extracted and organized relevant data into the coding frames. There is considerable overlap of text across the four frames due to the structure of argumentation employed (e.g., one sentence might suggest several remedies). It was clear that the policy-actors in the AFC network are more focused on advocating for specific remedies than defining problems, establishing causes, and making moral judgments. Despite this imbalance in the data, there were clear themes across the data set.

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<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed later, the degree centrality scores indicate a clear hierarchal ordering of this policy field.

<sup>6</sup> Eight actors provided no data for the following reasons: four organizations were issue specific and no longer exist; two organizations rely solely on social media for communication strategies and did not yield significant text. One organization merged with another organization outside the AFC network and no longer maintains a web presence, and one organization’s webpage yielded no text relevant to education policy during the time in which data were collected.

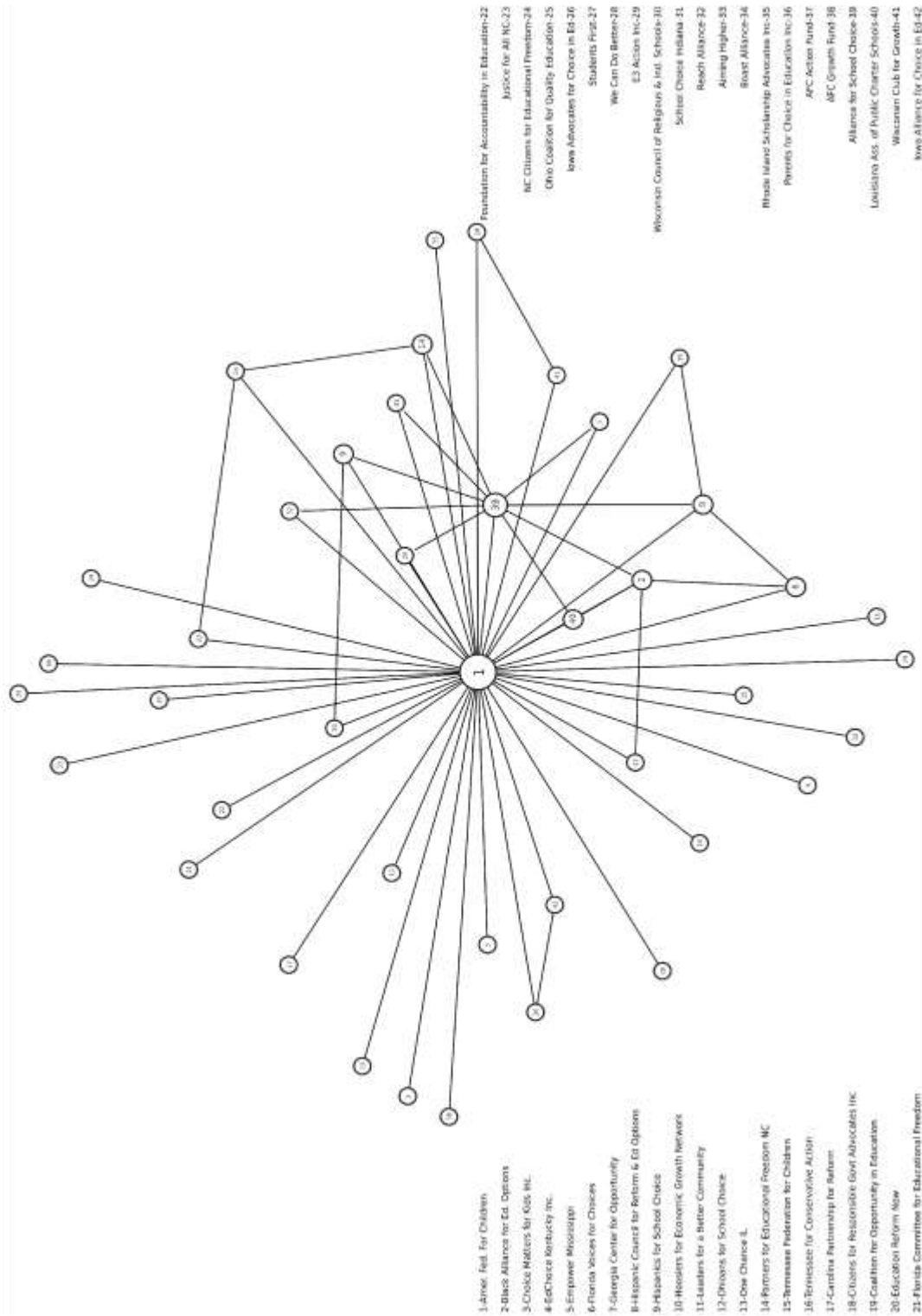


Figure 1. American Federation of Children Network Map





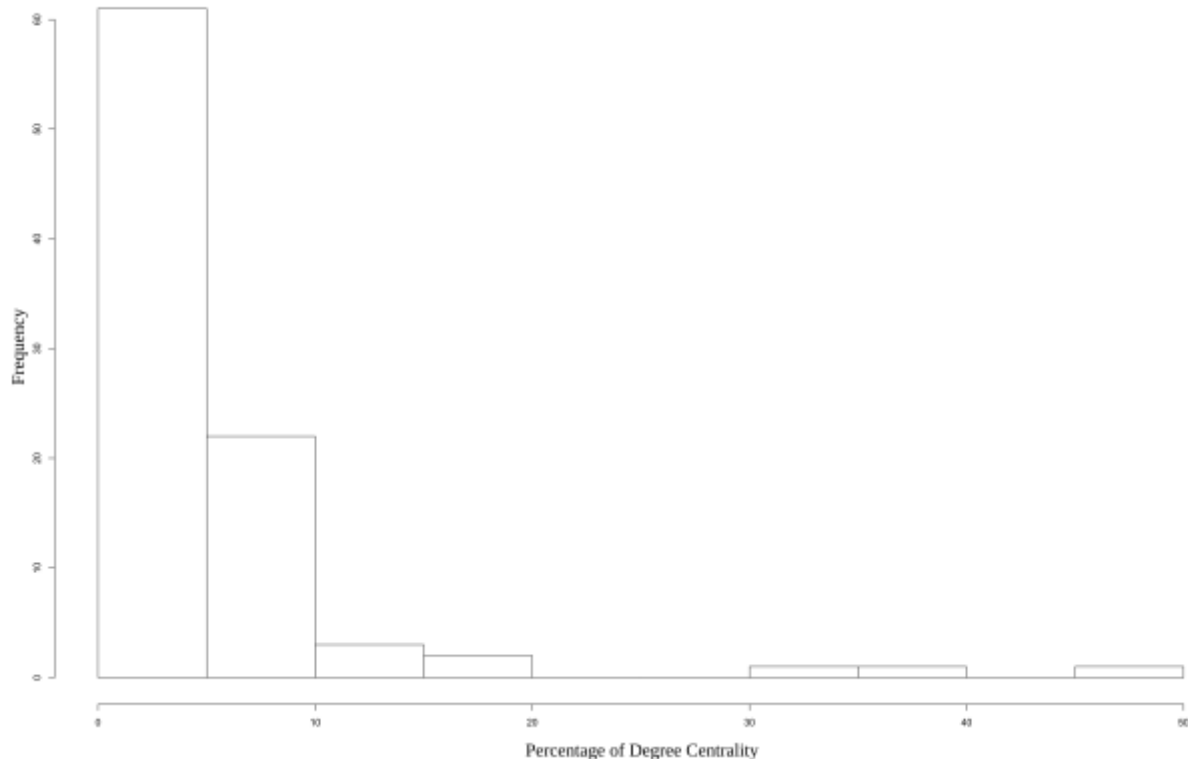


Figure 3. Frequency of the Percentages of Degree Centrality Scores

Once the coding frames were constructed, we carried out the following procedures for each frame. We read through the data making notes and recording distinct types of information in an analytic journal. Next, we coded the data using descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2009, pp. 70-73) developed from the information recorded in our analytic journal and then coded the data again using pattern codes (pp. 152-155). The pattern codes were then used to generate categories and sub-categories. The data were then re-organized around these categories and sub-categories to construct the four final coding frames.

The presentation of findings will follow the analytic structure of this study. We will first discuss the findings from the network analysis of the AFC. We will then present findings from the analysis of the discursive strategies employed by the AFC network. We will conclude by synthesizing the findings from the two phases of analysis and will discuss implications for future research.

### **Policy Field: The AFC Network**

The network maps generated by this analysis effectively illustrate the connections and complexity of this policy field. However, we must first offer a few words of caution to the reader. First, neither of the two network maps are comprehensive. The first map (Figure 1) presents a relatively complete picture of the AFC network, but the second network map (Figure 2) is necessarily truncated. The examination of 990 forms and supplementary web searches revealed an enormous number of connections and relationships well beyond the AFC network. A truly comprehensive network map of these relationships would be both visually incomprehensible and of

little analytic value. Thus, during data collection and analysis, we made strategic decisions to omit several large, national-level actors with more tenuous connections to the AFC (such as the Foundation for Excellence in Education, KIPP Foundation, and Clinton Foundation), relationships between individual actors (such as prominent philanthropists and politicians), and media and political consultancy firms. Second, the relatively narrow focus of the extended network map means that it likely understates the reach of some of the large, national-level actors (such as the Walton Family Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Fordham Foundation) and overstates the reach of smaller, state- and local-level actors (such as Empower Mississippi and Parents for Educational Freedom NC). Finally, these maps only establish relationships between and among policy-actors driving the policy cycle, but they cannot tell you the degree to which specific actors successfully influence policy or achieve political goals. With that said, we can learn a number of things from these two network maps.

First, an expansive network of actors inhabit this policy field. The AFC provided over \$7.7 million in funding to and established partnerships with forty-one policy actors operating nationally and locally. The expanded network map indicates that the AFC shares this policy field with other large policy networks with whom they share extensive connections. A review of mission statements, publications, and policy statements revealed that the actors on this policy field perform a variety of specialized tasks including political advocacy at the national- and state-levels, political lobbying, knowledge production and research, and financing through philanthropic giving and investment. Even with the narrow focus and the strategic omissions, the network maps help to illustrate both the breadth and depth of actors on this policy field and the complex web of connections among specialized policy-actors.

Second, there is a clear hierarchal ordering of actors on this policy field. The size of each node in the two maps is a function of the number of connections between actors and can therefore serve as a proxy for visualizing the distribution of material and symbolic resources among policy-actors on the policy field. At the top of the hierarchy are large, well-funded advocacy organizations, entrepreneurial philanthropies, and think tanks with national reach, and the bottom of the hierarchy is populated by state- and local-level advocacy organizations, political action committees, and think tanks focused on local policies. Recent scholarship on the role of new entrepreneurial philanthropies in education politics has explored the “hands-on” approach of these elite network actors (Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow, 2012; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Zeichner & Pena-Sandoval, 2015). Unlike philanthropies of the early- and mid-20th century that funded cultural institutions with little direct oversight, modern philanthropies seek to achieve social change in their grant-making, and they apply corporate oversight of how funds are spent, establish mechanisms by which success is measured, require regular data reporting, and establish accountability policies tied to the ability to produce ‘deliverables.’ Similarly, Rich (2005) traced the dramatic growth of partisan think tanks and policy organizations in the late 20th century producing advocacy research that reflect the interests and political goals of their elite funders, including philanthropies. McDonald (2014/2013) and DeBray-Pelot and McGuinn (2009) linked the emergence of a bi-partisan policy landscape in the post-No Child Left Behind era to the growing dominance of conservative think tanks in the education policy arena. Thus, the hierarchal ordering visible in the expanded network map likely reflects the unequal distribution of not just economic capital but also cultural and social capital among actors on this policy field and indicates that the operation of this field reflects the interests of elite network actors.

### **Policy Discourse: Framing the Debate**

The policy-actors in the AFC network employ a relatively uniform and sophisticated set of discursive strategies to advance what is clearly their primary political goal: to expand school choice

policies. These actors are focused on suggesting and justifying school choice policies. However, they also expend energy to establish policy problems, diagnose causes, and make moral judgments.

**Problem Definition**

Analysis of data in the problem definition frame yielded two categories and nine sub-categories (Table 1). The first category, education crisis, is made up of four sub-categories: failing schools, economic opportunity, one-size-fits-all, and drop-out. The political discourse of educational crisis has become a common feature of education policy debates in the four decades since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), and the data gathered for this study does little to advance the conversation or break new ground. These network-actors describe public education as a failing institution marked by low academic achievement, high drop-out rates, and an overly rigid and bureaucratic structure characterized as being “one-size-fits-all.” Further, they argue that these overall systemic failures erode economic opportunity for the nation, states, and individual students.

Table 1  
*Problem Definition*

Category	Sub-Category	Representative Data
Education Crisis	Failing Schools	The United States faces an education crisis, and despite the best efforts of parents and teachers, far too many low- and middle-income children are seeing their dreams denied. (AFC Growth Fund)
	Economics	Entrance into the 21st century’s competitive knowledge economy requires access to a quality education. But too many of our schools aren’t preparing our children for higher education. (Education Reform Now)
	One Size Fits All	TCA calls on Tennessee to reject the one-size-fits-all approach to education, and to empower families with the right to escape failing government-run schools. (Tennessee for Conservative Action)
	Drop Out	Today, too many schools are failing to adequately prepare children for the next phase of life, and without high-quality education options the dropout rates will continue to rise and cycles of poverty will never be broken. (Georgia Center for Opportunity)
Educational Inequality	Trapped	Too many children are trapped in schools that are not meeting their needs. (American Federation for Children)
	Systemic Inequality	Unfortunately, education disparity is becoming an epidemic. Kentucky students deserve the chance to succeed, but our current system lacks the resources to fix its ailments and educate those most in need. (EdChoice KY)
	Social Class	School choice has always existed for families who can afford to move or can pay for private school tuition. Unfortunately, for too many families moving or paying for private school tuition is simply impossible. (Empower Mississippi)
	Individual Needs	At (public) school it's hard to feel connected when you are going through grief like that [...] You feel isolated and alone and your teachers just think you're another face in the class. (Ohio Coalition for Quality Education)
	Achievement Gap	The study concludes that no matter what kind of school it is, if the student body is non-white, math proficiency rates are 46.5% lower and English proficiency rates are nearly 53% lower than schools that are all white. That’s devastating. Perhaps it can be a rallying point for minority leaders in the community to unite around meaningful reforms to save Wisconsin’s minority kids? (Hispanics for School Choice)

The second category, educational inequity, is made up of five sub-categories: trapped, systemic inequality, social class, individual needs, and achievement gap. The principle argument put forth by these network-actors is that any system that assigns schools based on where a family lives is inherently inequitable. Students are described as being “stuck” or “trapped” in a public education system plagued by a lack of resources, an institutional culture of low expectations, and indifference to student need. This systemic inequality is described as having a disproportionately negative effect on working families who, unlike their wealthier peers, cannot afford to move to a higher-performing district or pay private school tuition, to students with special needs who are not well served in a “one-size-fits-all” system, and to students of color who consistently under-perform compared to their white peers.

The policy-actors of the AFC network define the policy problem facing the education system by employing the discursive strategies of educational crisis and educational inequity. The educational crisis trope is a familiar discursive strategy that has been employed by policy-actors since the Reagan era (Berliner & Biddle, 1996). More interestingly, these policy-actors work to appropriate needs discourses (Swalwell & Apple, 2011) associated with struggling student populations in order to frame the educational crisis they describe as being a civil rights issue. Scott (2013) has argued that the appropriation of civil rights discourse is a common strategy of neoliberal reformers in the post-No Child Left Behind era; however the policy-actors in the AFC network work to expand and redefine educational inequity. For these policy-actors, inequity is conceptualized more broadly as the absence of consumer choice.

### Causal Diagnosis

Analysis of data in the causal diagnosis frame yielded one category, the education establishment, and five sub-categories: status quo, bureaucracy, political groups, unions, and misinformation (Table 2). The policy-actors in the AFC network identify the primary causal agent as a failing “status quo” frequently derided as an “educational monopoly.” This status quo is described

Table 2  
*Causal Diagnosis*

Category	Sub-Category	Representative Data
Education Establishment	Status Quo	Our parents voted in record numbers, creating a wave of resistance against a one-size-fits-all system. Against a status quo that puts adults' needs ahead of kids' needs. (Florida Voices for Choices)
	Bureaucracy	A bureaucracy cannot be as knowledgeable or as fierce an advocate as a parent who must face the consequences of their educational choices daily. (Empower Mississippi)
	Political Groups	Both groups called for an all-out ban on new charter schools opening up last summer, and BAEO has played an important role in countering the message from the NAACP and the Movement of Black Lives. (Black Alliance for Educational Options)
	Unions	Against the objections of both the school teachers' unions and other members of the education establishment, this legislation passed with bipartisan support. (Reach Alliance)
	Misinformation	Opponents of Parental Choice Programs use myths and distortions about religious and independent schools to discredit private K-12 education. (Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools)

as a bloated and ever-expanding bureaucracy protected by political groups and teachers’ unions who are described as engaging in dishonest attacks on education reformers and, by proxy, families and students.

What emerged from analysis of this coding frame is an oppositional discursive strategy that positions policy-actors in the AFC network as noble protagonists working with communities, families, and students to bring about systemic change to a failing and corrupt status quo that is defended by an antagonistic establishment working to preserve the bureaucracy and its own self-interests. The causal diagnosis frame works to build a mythic narrative structure (Barthes, 1957) that renders down complex political and policy debates to a crude dichotomy of conflict between protagonist and antagonist, a discursive practice that has taken on greater importance in an era of targeted messaging and partisan media (Polletta & Callahan, 2017). This narrative structure works to construct an epistemic framework through which to understand and make sense of current debates over school choice and establish a moral framework for passing judgment on the motivations of causal agents.

**Moral Judgment**

Analysis of data in the moral judgment frame yielded one category, dishonest actors, and three sub-categories: self-interested, false narrative, and elitist (Table 3). The policy-actors in the AFC network frame their political antagonists as self-interested actors pursuing, often dishonestly, their own elite needs. Bureaucratic actors, such as school boards, administrators and legislators, work to preserve their power and advantage and to thwart the empowerment of the parents and communities they serve. Civil rights groups, such as the NAACP and the National Council of La Raza, oppose school choice reforms against the interests and desires of the communities of color they represent. Teachers unions seek to retain their own power and spheres of influence with little concern for the families and communities teachers and schools serve. What emerged from analysis

Table 3  
*Moral Judgment*

Category	Sub-Category	Representative Data
Dishonest Actors	Self Interested	It is shameful that the school board continues to value money more than their students and would like nothing more than to remove options from parents. (Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools)
	False Narrative	Anti-Reform groups are working to misrepresent the goals of the pro-freedom agenda. (Carolina Partnership for Reform)
	Elitist	It amuses me how politicians act like they know better than I do when it comes to what’s best for my child. Some of these folks forgot that they were put in positions of power to represent us, the people. Are they so disconnected [from us] that they don’t even see how elitist they’ve become?,” one Nevadan mom told me at the end of the 2017 legislative cycle when the Education Savings Account was struck down from the state budget by the Democrats. (American Federation for Children)

of this coding frame is that the educational establishment is made up of dishonest actors intent on blocking the fundamental rights of parents in order to pursue their own self-interested goals.

The moral judgment passed by the policy-actors in the AFC network is informed by public choice theory (Buchanan, 1972; Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). Employing a neoclassical economic model to understand political behavior, public choice theory posits a misalignment between the incentives governing bureaucratic actors and notions of the public interest or public good. In this neoliberal political model, bureaucratic actors pursue their rational self-interest, which is to maintain the privilege and power they possess even when it conflicts with the interests of the public they supposedly serve. Entrenched power is not to be located among the economic and political class but in an amorphous “status quo” inhabiting district offices, school boards, and union halls. This neoliberal model works to redefine the elite as political and educational bureaucrats who oppose the expansion of market freedom in order to preserve their own domain of power and influence.

### Suggested Remedies

Analysis of the data in the suggested remedies frame yielded two categories and 10 sub-categories (Table 4). The first category, remedy, is made up of five sub-categories: ESA, charter school, voucher school, scholarship, and choice general. The second category, justify, is made up of four sub-categories: research, policy logic, momentum, and justice.

The over-arching policy remedy promoted by the policy-actors in the AFC network is school choice. The large, national-level actors promote school choice in general and advocate for an array of policies including education savings accounts (ESA), charter schools, voucher school programs, tax credits and scholarship programs, 529 savings accounts, open enrollment and course choice programs, and home schooling. The smaller, state-level actors advocate for a more narrow range of school choice policies that reflect the political contexts in which they operate. For example, the data collected from EdChoice KY reflected its advocacy for scholarship tax credit legislation that was under consideration by the Kentucky legislature at the time of data collection. The primary policy remedy promoted by the AFC network is clearly school choice, but the policy-actors in this network push to expand school choice policies on a wide variety of fronts and would appear to be opportunistic in their advocacy.

The policy-actors in the AFC network seek to justify their advocacy for school choice policies by making reference to studies and polling data produced by 29 policy actors: 12 think tanks,<sup>7</sup> three privately funded research centers,<sup>8</sup> two advocacy media outlets,<sup>9</sup> and 12 political and advocacy organizations.<sup>10</sup> Of that total, nine of the policy-actors cited to justify school choice policies are in the AFC network, including EdChoice which was the most frequently cited organization.<sup>11</sup>

The studies were cited as conclusive evidence that school choice policies produce higher achievement scores, lead to significant gains by students of color and the closing of achievement

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<sup>7</sup> Urban Institute, CATO Institute, EdChoice, Fordham Institute, Manhattan Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Goldwater Institute, Heartland Institute, Heritage Foundation, Democrats for Education Reform, Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, and the MacKinac Center.

<sup>8</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Mathematica, and School Choice Demonstration Project.

<sup>9</sup> *Education Next* and *The 74*.

<sup>10</sup> Foundation for Excellence in Education, AFC, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Center for Reinventing Public Education, BAEO, American Legislative Exchange Council, EdBuild, Center for Education Reform, New Schools Venture Fund, Iowa Alliance for Choice in Education, Alliance for School Choice, and Walton Family Foundation.

<sup>11</sup> Data produced by EdChoice was cited 11 times in the coding frame.

Table 4  
Suggested Remedies

Category	Sub-Category	Representative Data
Remedies	ESA	The American Federation for Children believes parents should have a wide range of high-quality schools or educational options to choose from – be it traditional public schools, public charter schools, private schools, or virtual learning. Private school choice, through scholarship tax credit programs, vouchers, education savings accounts and individual tuition tax credits, gives students, including those from low-income families or those with special needs the opportunity to receive tuition to attend a private school that meets their needs immediately. (American Federation for Children)
	Charter School Voucher School Scholarship	
	Choice General	We are united in the belief that all parents should have the ability to choose where their child attends school, without limitations. (Iowa Advocates for Choice)
Justify	Research	According to a 2013 report by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, school choice programs lead to higher achievement for students participating in choice programs and in public schools. (EdChoice KY)
	Policy Logic	“There is no one way or one setting that can be the right fit for every child,” Blake said. “Who knows the child better than everyone else? The parents. It should be up to the parents to decide where they want to send their child to school.” That is what school choice is all about. But school choice has the opportunity to do more than help parents choose the right school for their child; it can bolster an entire region of the state that for so long has suffered from failing public schools. (Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools)
	Momentum	School choice continues to gain momentum in Pennsylvania and across the nation. Weeks after Pennsylvania passed the EITC program, Florida followed suit and passed its own tax credit program. As of January 2007, Pennsylvania, Florida, Arizona, Iowa, and Rhode Island had instituted corporate educational tax credit programs. (Reach Foundation)
	Justice	Thomas Jefferson once said, “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” The Wisconsin Club for Growth echoes this sentiment. We believe that a sound educational foundation plays a vital role in maintaining the American Dream. Yet today, many of our children are trapped in failing schools, doomed to a life of dependency because they have been left without the basic education needed to succeed. It is our goal to ensure that every child, not matter what race, creed, color or social station has access to a quality education by working to break the educational monopoly and reform the current school system. (Wisconsin Club for Growth)

gaps, make schooling more cost efficient, and help students attend and complete university education. The polling data is used to demonstrate broad-based support for school choice policies by the public and, specifically, by communities of color. The positive outcomes associated with and support for school choice policies is attributed to the market logic and incentives of a competitive environment. School choice allows families to customize their educational services based on the individual needs of children, to receive specialized services not being provided by public schools, and to escape under-resourced, segregated and low-performing public schools. These positive outcomes contribute to growing public support and the emergence of a political consensus that school choice policies lead to academic achievement gains and a more equitable and just education system.

Analysis of the suggested remedies frame yields insights not only to the discursive strategies employed by policy-actors in the AFC network but also the structure of the network. The AFC network is flexible and opportunistic in its political advocacy for expanding school choice policies. The network has a general orientation toward policy but engage in contextualized political practices that work within the constraints of specific locations to exploit opportunities to advance school choice on all fronts available.

The policy-actors in the AFC network work to achieve their goals discursively by advancing a unified narrative of unmitigated success, growing momentum, political consensus, and consumer choice. However, what is perhaps more important is how they go about constructing this narrative. First, evidence for the success of school choice policies are drawn from policy institutes and think tanks funded by corporate and entrepreneurial philanthropies (McDonald, 2013, 2014). The AFC network and other network-actors in this policy field do not simply advocate for school choice policies but also engage in knowledge production for the development and evaluation of policy. Second, the policy logic of school choice draws upon a “thin” democratic model of consumer-citizenship (Apple, 2005) to position school choice policies as a growing movement toward empowerment and justice. To choose is to be politically empowered. Interestingly, in pointing toward the under-funding, segregation and inadequacies of public schools, these policy-actors are working to capitalize on decades of strategic disinvestment and austerity to advance neoliberal penetration into public education through a political discourse of recovery (Lipman, 2015; Slater, 2015).

## Discussion

The two phases of analysis presented here yield a number of insights into the AFC network and the policy field on which it operates. First, the two maps generated by the network analysis provide a topological perspective that makes clear both the complexity and hierarchal ordering of the school choice policy field. It is a field populated by an array of policy-actors from philanthropic and advocacy organizations, think tanks, political action committees, and education businesses that carry out specialized functions that work to advance school choice policies nationally and at the state- and local-levels. The actors on this policy field engage in political advocacy (e.g. the Alliance for School Choice and National Alliance for Public Charter Schools), financial speculation (e.g., New Schools Venture Fund and the Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program), political lobbying (e.g., the State Policy Network and AFC Action Fund), advocacy research (e.g., EdChoice and the Beacon Center), philanthropic giving (e.g. the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), and provide educational services (e.g., Edison Learning). Further, in addition to the clear hierarchal organization represented in the two network maps, analysis of the discursive strategies employed by policy-actors in the AFC network also point toward a hierarchal structure. The large, national actors in the AFC network advocate for school choice policies in general while small, state-level actors work in specific political contexts to advance specific school choice policies, frequently using research and polling data from large, national actors to do so. Overall, analysis demonstrates a clear hierarchical ordering of actors that likely reflect the uneven distribution of capitals among actors.

These findings lend credence to Ball’s (2009) conceptualization of education policy fields as being heterarchical. The AFC is one network among many others linked to one another in complex relations of reciprocal interdependence and varying degrees of independence and autonomy, yet not all actors within the AFC network and on this policy field more generally operate on an equal footing. Some actors clearly possess more economic capital, and likely social capital and cultural capital as well, than do others. Thus, we can conceptualize the school choice policy field as a



heterarchical space, or a structured space “collectively orchestrated without being the production of the orchestrating action of a conductor” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

Second, the hierarchal ordering of the AFC network and the policy field on which it operates is indicative of the elite planning and social engineering of neoliberal reforms (Miller, 2010). Neoliberalism is frequently identified as economic theory but doing so is both reductive and ignores the historical record (Mirowski, 2009, p. 427). From Mont Pelerin to nudge theory (Thayler & Sunstein, 2008), neoliberalism is an elite political project cloaked in the language of individual liberty and choice but actualized as a politics of “permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention” (Foucault, 2008, p. 132) or, as Mirowski (2009) notes, “the conditions for its existence must be constructed” (p. 434, emphasis in original).

Neoliberal education reform in the US is a long-term political project driven by ideology and the profit motive (Saltman, 2014) that has fomented educational crisis through strategic disinvestment in public institutions and sought to capitalize on the subsequent dislocation in the name of justice and equity (Lipman, 2015; Slater, 2015). The AFC provides philanthropic funding to a wide array of national- and state-level organizations that perform specialized functions in service to advancing a larger policy agenda of the DeVos family. The AFC works with other elite network actors in complex relations of cooperation, overlap, and/or competition in a crowded policy field unified around a set of broadly shared policy goals that seek normative justification in the language of justice and empowerment. In Bourdieuan terms, the elite actors in this policy field may compete over the doxa which constitute the organizational structure of the field but that doxa nonetheless reflect the elite interests of those actors inhabiting a privileged position in the field.

Third, the policy-actors in the AFC network employ discursive strategies to frame an elite politics as an anti-elite movement working to advance educational equity and justice. The AFC network-actors employ the now familiar trope of educational crisis that has long been a discursive strategy of conservative education reformers advancing school choice policies (Walberg & Bast, 2003). These actors also take up the language of civil rights and empowerment that is now frequently employed by both conservative and progressive policy-actors in the post-No Child Left Behind era (Scott, 2013a). What is more significant is that this discursive positioning of AFC network-actors in opposition to a self-interested bureaucracy situates these elite actors as anti-elite populists battling entrenched power. This entrenched elite is discursively positioned as self-interested actors who are indifferent to the needs and interests of students and parents and are therefore a key driver of educational inequality.

In so doing, the policy-actors of the AFC network subtly redefine educational inequality. These policy-actors do speak to the inequality of educational opportunity that disproportionately affects communities of color, but they seek to shift the focus away from issues of funding, resources, teacher experience, etc. and toward a market model of political empowerment that reifies the structural inequalities of public institutions and individualizes the pursuit of equity as consumer choice (Giroux, 2003). It is a discursive strategy that, on the one hand, acknowledges the historical inequalities that have plagued communities of color while, on the other hand, erasing issues of segregation and systemic racism. The AFC network-actors advance a neoliberal conception of political empowerment as consumer choice (Scott, 2013b) that brackets out structural and historical inequalities.

What is perhaps even more significant is that redefining inequality as a lack of consumer choice expands the range of oppressed groups beyond historically disadvantaged student populations. While organizations such as Hispanics for School Choice and the Black Alliance for Educational Options clearly orient their advocacy toward historically marginalized communities of color, it is telling that other actors frequently employed terminology such as “working families” and

“middle class families.” The discursive construction of inequality as the absence of consumer choice produces a new marginalized class made up of more privileged student populations as it obscures historical inequality and racism. Thus, in redefining inequality, the discursive strategies employed by these network-actors expand the range of marginalized student populations as they redefine the pursuit of educational justice. A just educational system is one that maximizes consumer choice.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study offer insight into the modus operandi of policy-actors in the AFC network from which we can make inferences about heterarchical governance in education more generally. Elite network-actors employ economic, cultural, and social capital on the education policy field to advance a relatively uniform set of policy goals. Specific actors on this policy field fulfill specific roles from political advocacy and lobbying to knowledge production, but the net effect of their activity is an elite political project to advance a relatively uniform set of neoliberal school reform policies. Further, these unelected and largely unregulated network-actors work outside of traditional mechanisms for democratic accountability (Scott, 2009), yet they are increasingly able to influence the tenor and tempo of education policy reform (Au & Ferrare, 2014). More importantly, there is little indication that these trends toward heterarchical governance in education will not persist into the near future.

Ball’s (1994) policy cycle approach provides important tools to explore and understand heterarchical governance in education policy. Lingard and Sellar (2013) observe that Ball’s policy cycle approach rejects an “oversimplified, linear-hierarchical account” of policy work focusing instead on “the non-linear, interactive, multidirectional reality of policy as both text and process across three interactive contexts: the context of influence, the context of text production, and the context of practice” (p. 268). This study makes a small contribution to the development of analytic tools to examine the contexts of influence and text in the policy cycle. However, there is a clear need for further research that explores the shifting networks of policy-actors on the education policy field; the production of discursive power; the actualization and negotiation of policy discourse by non-elite actors on the policy field, such as teachers, students and families; and the dynamic interplay of power across these three contexts. Heterarchical governance in education policy raises serious questions about the growing power of elite actors to drive educational change without being held accountable to the students, teachers, families, and communities over which they exert influence. Further study is needed to identify and map the elite network-actors setting agendas, defining educational problems, and advancing policy solutions; critically examine the discursive production of policy through analyses of legislation and popular political texts produced by network-actors on the education policy field; tease out the normative justifications informing the setting of agendas, defining of problems, and policy formulation; and construct evaluative frameworks to “measure first-order policy effects, which are measured against the policy’s own articulated goals, and second-order effects, which require a more normative assessment” (Lingard & Sellar, 2013).

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