

Ideological Tensions in Education Policy Networks: An Analysis of the Policy Innovators in Education Network in the United States

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Abstract: Previous research has illustrated that advocacy organizations play a crucial role in education policy networks by communicating educational reform agendas to public and private stakeholders. In the United States, an inter-state consortium of these advocacy organizations has formed their own network. The Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) network is a formal, centrally coordinated policy network that connects state-level advocacy organizations to one another and to national advocacy organizations, think tanks, and philanthropic foundations. Despite more than doubling in size since 2016, little is known about the policy preferences of PIE members. In this paper, we use social network analysis to identify and describe the ideological dimensions of advocacy that structure the PIE Network and to examine how these ideological dimensions have changed as the network has expanded. We find that the central areas of emphasis among these organizations have coalesced around neoliberal ideologies that promote accountability and standards. However, there is an underlying tension within the network that unfolds along two dimensions. On the one hand, preferences for choice and autonomy (e.g., charters, general choice, and autonomy & deregulation) are contrasted to those favoring equitable funding for low-income schools and early childhood education. On the other hand, members emphasize policies involving factors internal to schools (student interventions, leadership standards and accountability) to those external to schools (e.g., familial support, funding-based equity). These tensions within the network have grown more pronounced over time as the network has expanded to include new members with a more ideological narrow set of market-based policy preferences.

Keywords: policy networks; PIE Network; Policy Innovators in Education; education policy; school reform; advocacy organizations; intermediary organizations; social network analysis.

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1. Introduction

Policy networks are a central governance feature of neoliberal education reform movements around the world (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball & Junemann, 2012; Verger *et al.*, 2016). These networks are constituted by public and private organizations that exchange resources and work within, between, and around the bureaucratic structures that have traditionally shaped the formation of education policy in democratic societies (Rhodes, 2006). While not new to the education policy sphere, these networks have expanded dramatically in scope alongside systemic shifts toward data-driven accountability systems across educational subsystems (Galey, 2015).

Although policy networks have become a nearly ubiquitous feature of educational governance around the world, the ways these networks operate varies widely across contexts (Ball, 2012). In the United States, policy networks have proliferated, in part, as a response to the federal mandates of policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top, which imposed or induced state-level requirements with limited federal infrastructure to support such reforms (Mehta & Teles, 2012). These policy networks formed in an effort to fill the governance gaps created by these mandates, while also creating spaces where numerous interest groups could work to reshape policy ideas (Song & Miskel, 2005).

There are, then, a variety of types of policy networks operating in the educational domain. For example, in the United States, funding networks consisting of philanthropic foundations and their nonprofit grantees have had a dramatic impact on the proliferation of choice-based reforms (Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Scott & Jabbar, 2014), especially charter school reform (Ferrare & Setari, 2018) and alternative teacher certification (Kretchmar *et al.*, 2014). Issue networks, meanwhile, have also expanded across the education policy arena as these shifting policies create new politics and associated interest groups (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Galey, 2015; Galey-Horn *et al.*, 2019).

Advocacy organizations have flourished in this multifaceted network environment, taking advantage of increased philanthropic funding and new political terrain favorable to their objectives (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Scott, 2009, 2015). In particular, many advocacy organizations now serve as intermediaries between private entities (foundations, business interests, think tanks) and traditional public institutions (school systems, legislative bodies) (Debray *et al.*, 2014). This intermediary role is crucial in the data-driven environment of neoliberal governance, which requires new forms of knowledge diffusion without a formalized system to do this work (Ball, 2012). As with many neoliberal forms, the governance context of this environment is not democratic, but instead designed to work between democratic and private spheres of influence.

To date, much attention has focused on the alignment of advocacy organizations to neoliberal reform movements in education (Au & Ferrare, 2014; Lubienski *et al.*, 2011, 2016), and has generally argued that the primary tensions in these spaces are between the organizations in policy networks (foundations, advocacy, think tanks) and the traditional bureaucratic institutions of governance (unions, local education agencies, state education agencies). In this paper we argue –and empirically demonstrate– that new ideological tensions are emerging *within* these network spaces. These tensions show the contradictions that are inherent to neoliberal projects and provide a way of conceptualizing how network governance can be a space for multiple projects –not just neoliberal ones–.

The context of our analysis centers on one of the fastest growing educational advocacy networks in the United States: the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network. The PIE Network is a formal policy network that connects state-level advocacy organizations to one another and to national advocacy organizations, think tanks, and philanthropic foundations. Despite doubling in size since 2016 to include nearly 90 members across 32 states, little is known about the policy preferences of PIE members and their partner organizations. To address this gap in the literature, we explored the following research questions:

1. How have PIE Network members' policy preferences changed as the network has expanded to include more members?

2. What are the underlying ideological tensions among early and more recent members of the network?

Our analysis makes use of these organizations' policy briefs, advocacy materials, and other publicly-available documents that serve as the public face of their advocacy work. Using social network analysis and related techniques, we analyze the different ideological dimensions and tensions that have taken shape within the PIE Network as it has expanded over time.

2. Literature Review and Background

The presence of advocacy organizations in the education policy arena has a long tradition in the United States, as organizations aligned across the ideological spectrum (e.g., NAACP, American Enterprise Institute) have been working to shape policy outcomes for decades. Historically, these groups have had limited influence in relation to the so-called «education establishment» consisting of major teachers unions (NEA, AFT) and other groups that represent state and local jurisdictional actors (Moe, 2011). The latter groups have generally resisted attempts to expand school choice, teacher-based accountability systems, and other neoliberal reforms. However, in the past decade these policies have spread widely across states as a new set of advocacy groups have mobilized bi-partisan support (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; McGuinn, 2012) and the financial backing of wealthy elites and foundations (Au & Ferrare, 2014; Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Kretchmar *et al.*, 2014; Reckhow, 2010; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Scott, 2009, 2015).

Education advocacy organizations operate within policy networks with a variety of other private and public organizations that exchange financial, human, and

informational resources in an effort to influence policy outcomes (Rhodes, 2006). As a particular type of intermediary organization (IO), advocacy organizations are positioned in a «hub and spoke» structure and rely heavily on the financing of private foundations (Scott & Jabbar, 2014). Prior research has found that major and non-major foundations in the United States have been increasing the share of their grant funding to advocacy organizations in an effort to bolster market-based reforms (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Reckhow, 2010; Scott, 2009). Thus, many of these organizations must be at least somewhat ideologically aligned with the broader policy objectives of philanthropic foundations (Debray *et al.*, 2014; Scott, 2015; Scott & Jabbar, 2014).

Policy scholars in education have begun to draw upon the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) as a way to analyze policy formation processes within these education policy networks (e.g., Debray *et al.*, 2014; Galey-Horn *et al.*, 2019). Traditional ACF theory identifies three levels of policy-related beliefs conceptualized as a nested hierarchy (Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 194): deep core beliefs (e.g., «open markets drive innovation»), policy core beliefs (e.g., «parents should have educational choices»), and policy preferences (e.g., «states should remove caps on charter schools»). Thus, the ACF prioritizes the role of beliefs and preferences in understanding policy formation and change.

Discourse network theory (Leifeld, 2013b), meanwhile, builds on the advocacy coalition tradition in policy network studies. This approach argues that advocacy coalitions are comprised of multiple discourse networks that organize around «policy core policy preferences». Altogether, these beliefs comprise a policy belief system that drives inter-dependencies across institutional and political boundaries. Generally, discourse coalitions correspond to meso-level policy core beliefs and are of particular significance because they set the terms of debate in policy-making domains. Put differently, competing discourse coalitions vie to draw the cognitive map that determines how the public and policymakers think about policy issues.

Policymakers cannot discuss all possible issues in one domain simultaneously. As a result, a few issues tend to dominate the policy discourse at different points in time. For example, recent work has found that school-based accountability discourse networks were prominent among federal policymakers during the George W. Bush administration, but this network was transformed by a teacher-based accountability network during the Obama years (Galey-Horn *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, emergent issue area networks can anticipate major policy change, such as the rise of the charter issue network in the 1990s and early 2000s. Factions and sub-divisions within coalitions, or the emergence of a third coalition, are often explained by disagreements over issue areas that challenge dominant belief systems (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). A key objective of discourse network analysis is to understand the ideational dynamics shaping these coalitions. In the following analysis, we build on prior studies of policy networks in education by examining the policy preference structures and tensions constituting an expanding network of education advocacy organizations in the United States: the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE).

Prevailing evidence suggests that the dominant intermediary organizations (advocacy organizations, foundations, think tanks) working within contemporary education policy networks are primarily advancing a neoliberal agenda that

emphasizes the marketization of public education (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball & Junemann, 2012). This form of organizational isomorphism is expected by various branches of new institutional theory (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). However, more recent work from organizational field theory suggests that, even in relatively homogenous network spaces, less dominant groups are always cultivating alternative visions to the prevailing order (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). This field-theoretical perspective has started to find its way into the education policy network literature, especially as it relates to the role of philanthropic foundations (Ferrare & Apple, 2017; Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). In the following, we use this assumption to guide our analysis of the ideological tensions currently structuring the PIE Network.

3. The PIE Network

The Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) network was established in 2007 and has the stated objective to «connect state-level education advocacy organizations with colleagues across the country to amplify their voices and maximize their impact» (PIE, 2019, n.p.).¹ The PIE Network was founded on the assumption that education reform efforts have to extend beyond the federal level to include work that is attentive to state and local complexities (McGuinn, 2012). The network context of PIE is intended to help coordinate these efforts through information and resource exchange, which ostensibly enables collaboration, innovation, and strategic response (PIE, 2019). To assist in these processes, the PIE Network links state organizations to a variety of pro-reform think tanks (e.g., The Education Trust, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Thomas B. Fordham Institute) and foundations (e.g., Gates, Broad, Walton). Thus, unlike many policy networks, which are nebulous and difficult to identify (Ball & Junemann, 2012), the PIE Network has clear boundaries that distinguish members from non-members.

Although the PIE Network has clear boundaries, the membership base is in a constant state of flux. At present (March 2020), there are 88 members of the PIE Network spread across 32 states and the District of Columbia. The members include stand-alone organizations (e.g., Kids Ohio!, Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition) and those that affiliate with a national organization (e.g., Stand for Children Colorado, Democrats for Education Reform Washington). However, within the past few years the network has nearly tripled in size, and since PIE was established in 2007 numerous members have left. As a condition of membership (there are no monetary dues), the lead executive from each organization must participate in at least one major PIE meeting per year, and member organizations must complete two annual surveys that collect information related to policy work and upcoming priorities. Participation is reviewed annually and failure to meet these conditions can lead to loss of membership.

The impressive growth of the PIE Network has taken shape alongside unprecedented philanthropic and other private funding of advocacy organizations in the United States and abroad. Many of the newer entrants into the PIE Network are those whose national parent organizations received substantial contributions from

¹ Cited from <http://pie-network.org/mission-vision/> on March 25, 2019.

major venture philanthropists (e.g., Stand For Children) (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014), a trend that was also observed among non-major foundations (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). This pattern of convergent funding took shape within a context of bi-partisan ideological convergence in the education policy arena in the United States (Galey-Horn *et al.*, 2020). The extent to which this ideological convergence is reflected among the advocacy organizations in the PIE Network is a question addressed by the present study.

4. Data and Methods

Data collection began by downloading a wide range of content from n=89 PIE members' websites, such as mission/advocacy statements, summaries, and press releases. The latter content allowed us to build a broad picture of each organization's policy priorities. The primary objective of the data collection phase was to capture the policy core beliefs and policy preferences of each PIE Network member. Data sources consisted of reports, policy briefs, and press releases gathered from member websites. In cases where information was scarce on member websites, we sought secondary sources through media press releases and other online archival sources. These documents were then thematically coded (Saldaña, 2013) to create summaries of each organization's policy priorities and advocacy agenda. The summaries were then uploaded to the Discourse Network Analyzer software (Leifeld, 2013a) in order to be coded into policy core beliefs and policy preferences (details of this process discussed below).

In addition to collecting information related to each organization's policy beliefs and preferences, we gathered attributes corresponding to the organizations and the states in which they perform their advocacy work. The attributes include whether or not an organization is part of a national parent organization (e.g., Democrats for Education Reform), the year they joined the PIE Network, and the state where they reside. The timing of entry into the network serves as a key demarcation in our analysis, as 2016 represents the year during which the PIE Network doubled in size and has continued to expand since. Our sample of n=89 current and former members includes 48 organizations who joined between 2007 and 2014, and 41 organizations who joined between 2016 and 2018.

5. Coding Analysis

The principles of qualitative coding informed by grounded theory guided the process of creating, evaluating, and refining codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldana, 2013). A single coder conducted a line-by-line analysis of thirty-five randomly selected PIE Network members' policy proposals while noting recurrent policy priorities. A policy advanced by a minimum of three organizations prompted the writing of an associated code. This process concluded with a total of 79 initial policy categories. These codes were then clustered and sub-categorized according to the primary focus of the proposed reform: schools, district leadership, principals, teachers, state governing bodies, or students.

After formulating the preliminary coding scheme for shared policy priorities, further analysis revealed that while PIE Network members advocate for a variety of different reforms, many members' advocacy agendas share thematic or ideological principles (i.e. policy core beliefs). The identification of these policy core beliefs allowed for a clearer system of organization. The preliminary 79 policy-type codes were thus further organized according to the underlying policy priorities they reflected. These policy core beliefs provided seven selective coding categories: (1) Autonomy and Deregulation, (2) Choice, (3) Early Childhood Opportunities, (4) Evaluation, Incentive, and Accountability, (5) Standards and Quality, (6) Equity, and (7) Support. To provide a common example of the application of this coding taxonomy, a PIE Network member's proposal to tie teacher evaluations to student assessment scores was coded under the selective category «Evaluation, Incentive, and Accountability D». The «D» subsection houses accountability-inspired proposals focused on teachers, as opposed to those concerned with governing bodies, schools, administration, or student data. This proposal was sub-categorized under the policy code «Link teacher evaluation systems to student performance».²

The policies housed under the «equity» and «support» codes tended to diverge from the more strictly neoliberal and meritocratic orientation reflected in other categories of policy priorities. The majority of policies that were coded under the Equity category advocated for the redistribution of school funding to prioritize low-income districts and schools, and/or those serving a majority of racially minoritized students. Other policies coded in the Equity category included 1) incentivizing and recruiting high-quality teachers to teach in minority and/or low-income school districts, 2) recruiting teachers of color, and 3) supporting English Language Learner education.

Following codebook construction, each PIE Network member organization's policy summaries were imported into Discourse Network Analyzer (DNA), a qualitative, category-based coding software which facilitates the generation of network data structures (Leifeld, 2013a). Each PIE Network member organization was tagged as an «actor», and their chief policy proposals were coded as «statements» so that the strength of the ideological and advocacy priorities shared among them could be mapped and quantified. Throughout the coding process, several new policy categories were added through the constant comparative process to capture types of proposals not suggested by the initial sample (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The number of organizations calling for charter authorizer reform, literacy achievement, and improved systems of principal evaluation justified the creation of novel policy categories, among others, resulting in a final count of 88 policy codes. The coder also broadened several of the earlier categories, most often to capture vague or unspecific policy solutions. For instance, the code for «Link teacher tenure to performance» was modified to capture general support for teacher tenure reform, as organizations did not always specify the type of tenure reform they favored. In rare cases, initial codes were combined. «Promote college readiness» was merged

²The codebook constructed by Galey and Ferrare (2016) and Reckhow *et al.* (2016) suggested several similar codes adaptable to our schema, particularly pertaining to teacher accountability. The present codebook is modeled after their structural framework, similarly featuring categories of policy proposals arranged within a hierarchy of overarching priorities.

with «Promote career readiness», for example, as these priorities appeared together with overwhelming consistency.

For codes at the second (higher) level of abstraction, or those reflecting shared policy core beliefs, it was necessary to split the set of policy codes concerning Early Childhood Opportunities from those within the more generic Support category, and to divide proposals backing Autonomy and Deregulation from the set of Choice codes. A notable number of PIE Network organizations professed the desirability of reforms reflecting these values *in se*, meriting the creation of more precise, self-contained groupings. Approximately thirty anomalous proposals, defined as proposals advanced by fewer than three organizations total, remained outliers to the coding scheme, e.g. the Foundation for Florida's Future's support of virtual schooling and Mississippi First's advocacy for comprehensive sex education. These outliers excluded, most of the categories gleaned from the initial sample captured the remaining organizations' substantive policy solutions and the shared ideologies permeating them. Several alterations and additions aside, the early codes did not require profound structural revision. Encountering few cases of ambiguity, most key policy proposals fell within the bounds of one or several of the initial or refined codes.

Once the data were coded into policy core beliefs and policy preferences, we created a member-by-policy core belief matrix and a member-by-policy preference matrix. These two matrices served as the primary data sets for the analysis. Each organization occupies a row in the matrix, and each policy belief/preference is assigned a column. A '1' denotes that member *m* has adopted policy belief/preference *p*. These two-mode matrices were post-multiplied to create one-mode member-by-member matrices in which each cell indicates the number of policy beliefs/preferences that each pair of members shares in common. The original two-mode matrices were also pre-multiplied into one-mode policy belief/preference-by-policy belief/preference matrices indicating the number of organizations each pair of beliefs/preferences shares in common.

6. Social Network Analysis

We use a variety of descriptive methods from social network analysis to address our primary research questions. First, we use measures of network density and compactness to examine whether or not changes in the preference structure of the network corresponded to changes in the organizational structure. Typically, density is the most basic measure of a network's structure and is calculated as the number of observed ties divided by the total number of possible ties. In this analysis, however, density is derived for two-mode data and is calculated as the number of ties divided by the product of the number of actors in events (policy preferences in this case).

Another measure of cohesion used and our analysis is compactness:

$$\frac{\sum_{i \neq j} \left(\frac{1}{d_{ij}} \right)}{N(N-1)}$$

Where d_{ij} represents the geodesic distance between actors i and j and N is the number of actors. Compactness is similar to the measure of connectedness, which is the proportion of pairs of actors that can reach each other by any path length (i.e., they are in the same component). In the present context, this means there is a discursive path connecting pairs of PIE Network members. The measure of compactness goes a step further by weighting the paths of connected nodes inversely by their path length (for a more detailed description of these measures, see Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

In addition to these measures of cohesion, we use multidimensional scaling (MDS) to analyze the structure of policy preferences among members who joined the PIE Network prior to 2016, and again among those who joined in 2016 or later during the wave of mass expansion. Multidimensional scaling is a data reduction technique that allows for the visualization of proximities between objects in a multi (usually two)-dimensional space (Borg & Groenen, 2005; Kruskal & Wish, 1978). In this context, «objects» are the policy preferences of the PIE Network members and proximities are defined through Jaccard similarity (i.e., the proportion of instances in which each pair of preferences were co-preferred when at least one of them was preferred). Not only does MDS allow for the visualization of preference (dis)similarity, it also enables analysts to interpret the underlying principles organizing the entire space of preferences.

In using these quantitative techniques to analyze qualitative codes, we emphasize the structure and underlying ideological tensions of policy preferences among PIE members. These tools were selected because they are well suited to address our research objectives. However, other modes of qualitative analysis could be used in future work to further unpack the meanings of these policy preferences and how they change over time. In depth discourse analysis (e.g., Gee, 2014), for example, would be a powerful way to illustrate the discursive strategies of PIE Network members as they advance their policy agendas.

7. Results

Members who joined the PIE Network prior to its 2016 expansion exhibited a multifaceted set of policy preferences within the educational sphere. To be sure, the dominant preferences among these members included many of the standards and accountability policies that gained prominence leading up to and following the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. For instance, approximately three-quarters of members who joined PIE prior to 2016 actively advocated for teacher-based standards (77%) and college and career curricular standards (73%), and a majority had preferences for accountability policies related to student performance (65%), teachers (56%), and school performance (50%) (see Table 1).

Beyond these core policy preferences, members joining prior to the 2016 expansion also integrated a wide variety of preferences ranging from early childhood education (42%), school choice (42% charters; 40% choice in general), to issues concerning equity in general (35%) and via instruction (33%) and funding (23%) in particular. Many of these organizations also advocated for support services directly to families and communities (21%) and student interventions (29%), among other forms. The integrated structure of preferences among these members can be measured

in terms of their compactness. Relative to members who joined among the recent wave of entrants, earlier entrants had a highly compact network structure (0.874 when considering a tie as sharing two or more preferences in common; 0.746 at greater than 3 preferences in common) and far fewer network components (2 and 4, respectively). These measures indicate that this subset of members tended to share numerous preferences in common, and that some form of common ground could be established across nearly all of the actors in the network.

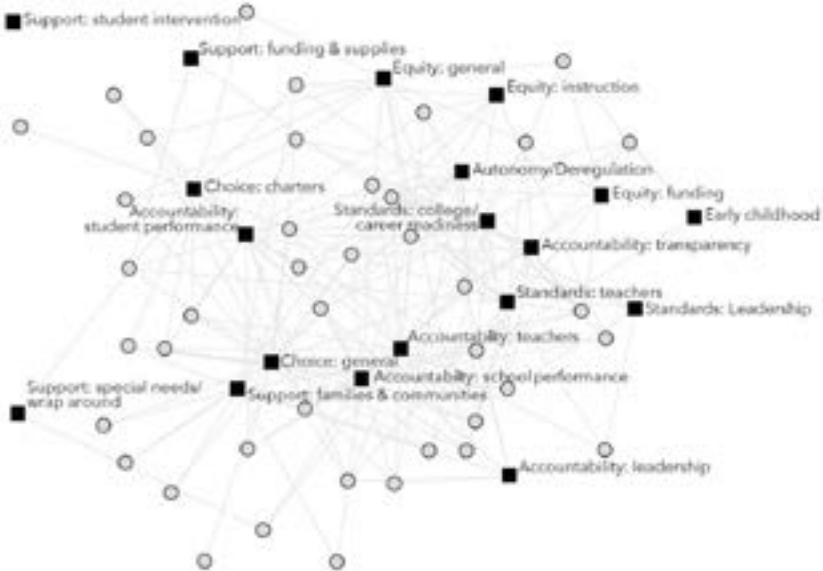
Table 1. Policy preferences and differential preference rank among PIE Network members by entry cohort (pre-2016 and 2016+ entry to the network)

	Proportion of Pre-2016 Members	PRE 2016 Preference Rank	Proportion of 2016+ Members	2016+ Preference Rank	Rank Difference
Standards: teachers	0.77	1	0.34	7	-6
Standards: college/ career readiness	0.73	2	0.39	4	-2
Accountability: student performance	0.65	3	0.39	4	-1
Accountability: teachers	0.56	4	0.54	2	2
Accountability: school performance	0.50	5	0.54	2	3
Standards: Leadership	0.44	6	0.12	15	-9
Choice: charters	0.42	7	0.39	4	3
Early childhood	0.42	7	0.07	16	-9
Choice: general	0.40	9	0.56	1	8
Equity: general	0.35	10	0.29	9	1
Accountability: transparency	0.35	10	0.29	9	1
Autonomy/Deregulation	0.33	12	0.32	8	4
Equity: instruction	0.33	12	0.17	12	0
Support: student intervention	0.29	14	0.00	17	-3
Equity: funding	0.23	15	0.15	13	2
Support: families & communities	0.21	16	0.29	9	7
Accountability: leadership	0.19	17	0.15	13	4
Support: funding & supplies	0.15	18	0.05	17	1
Support: special needs/ wrap around	0.08	19	0.05	17	2

Figure 1. Policy preference network among members who joined PIE prior to 2016



Figure 2. Policy preference network among members who joined PIE in 2016 or later



The more recent wave (2016+) of entrants brought a distinct set of interests to the network in terms of substance and structure. Most notably, the primacy of standards-based reform was replaced with a more widespread preference for promoting general school choice policies. While holding teachers and schools accountable remained priorities among this newer subset of the network, few other preferences appeared to have widespread support. For example, early childhood education was a preferred policy among 42% of pre-2016 entrants, while only 7% of the recent members expressed this preference. Similarly, support for student interventions was preferred by nearly a third of early entrants (29%), but not a single member of the new wave of network members advocated for these policies.

Those entering the PIE Network in 2016 or later also did not share a widespread set of secondary preferences that characterized the pre-2016 set of entrants. This can be observed in both the decline in the average proportion of organizations expressing a preference for any given policy (39% among early entrants; 27% among 2016+ entrants) as well as the decline in the structural pathways through which organizations shared multiple preferences in common. In fact, when using a threshold of sharing at least three preferences in common, the newer entrants had nearly four times the number of network components as the pre-2016 entrants (11 compared to 4, respectively). In other words, the newer entrants tended to have a narrower policy agenda with fewer opportunities for common ground across other members in their entry cohort. This difference can be observed visually in the network graphs in Figures 1 and 2. Note that the pre-2016 entrants exhibited a denser structure than the 2016+ entrants (2-mode density 0.389 and 0.268, respectively), with significantly more paths that connect their preferences.

In addition to observing direct network measures, we can also explore the underlying principles along which more recent and older members' preferences were structured. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the MDS plots of the Jaccard similarities in preferences. The distances between preferences can be directly interpreted as their degree of (dis)similarity vis-à-vis members' preference sets. Among the pre-2016 entrants, we can see a core set of preferences favoring standards and accountability along with early childhood education and equity-based policies in general and in school funding in particular. The main tensions among this subset (i.e., preferences on opposite poles of the MDS plot in Figure 3) reside in the juxtaposition of supporting families indirectly through choice-based policies versus providing direct support to families and communities as well as for funding and supplies. In other words, the tension at the margins are structured by preferences for reforms endogenous to formal systems (e.g., via charter school expansion) and those exogenous to formal systems (e.g., via community-based support).

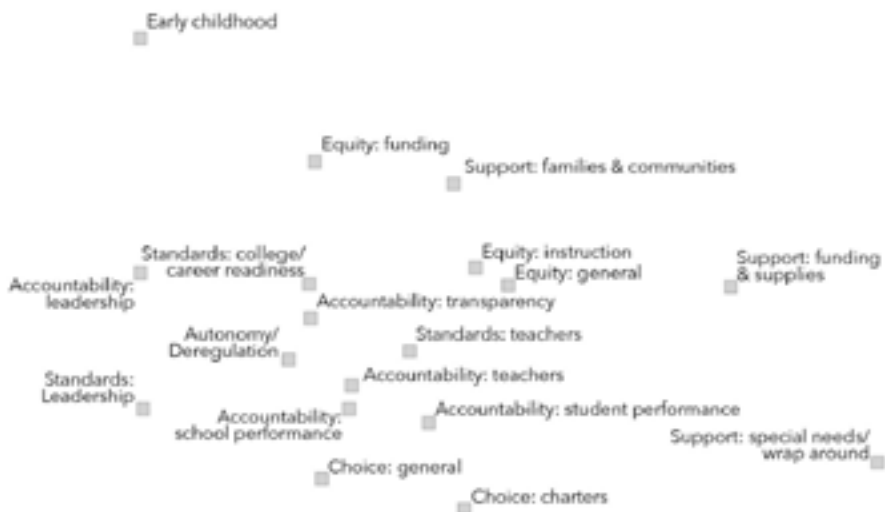
Among the more recent entrants, meanwhile, the plot (see Figure 4) illustrates more diffuse subsets of preferences. Choice and accountability were more frequently preferred together, while preferences for equity, early childhood education and support services represented areas of tension in the space. The marginal position of these preferences relative to all others in the space suggests that when these preferences were part of organizations' agenda, they rarely espoused the other preferences in the space. It was not uncommon, for example, for early entrants to advocate school choice policies while simultaneously pushing for equitable funding and early childhood education. However, among more recent members, these policy preferences represented opposing positions

in the network. There remains a tension between endogenous and exogenous reform strategies at the margins, but among newer entrants the endogenous reform strategy takes the form of leader-based standards and accountability rather than choice-based reforms (which were more central among these members).

Figure 3. MDS plot of preference similarity among PIE members who joined prior to 2016, stress = 0.191



Figure 4. MDS plot of preference similarity among PIE members who joined 2016 or later, stress = 0.171



8. Discussion & Conclusions

Overall, our analysis of the policy preferences among PIE Network members illustrated that, as the network expands, it does so with members who are less likely exhibit meaningful overlap in their policy agendas. Whereas pre-2016 members appeared to embody broad reaching policy agendas emphasizing both neoliberal and (traditionally defined) equity-based policies, members joining in the more recent wave of entry tended to espouse a more narrow (or some could say focused) policy agenda that was almost entirely neoliberal in scope. This was evidenced in the dramatic decrease in proportion of organizations working to advance early childhood education and equity-based funding and the increase in general school choice preferences.

We also found underlying tensions within the network that differentially unfolded among pre-2016 and 2016+ entrants. Among early members, preferences for choice and autonomy (e.g., charters, general choice, and autonomy & deregulation) were integrated with equity-based approaches to school funding and early childhood education, but contrasted to those favoring community-based reforms outside of the formal school system. Later members, however, integrated choice-based policies into the central core of preferences while marginalizing equity-based approaches, while a second tension emerged between leadership reform and those reforms exogenous to schools (e.g., familial support, wrap-around services).

These findings build on prior research by policy scholars working in this area of the literature. Previous studies have already established that many intermediary organizations in the United States and beyond are mobilizing managerial and market-based reforms (e.g., Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Debray *et al.*, 2014; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). However, our findings raise the possibility that, at least in the case of the PIE Network, some education policy networks may also be viewed as spaces of tension rather than *a priori* spaces of consensus concerning the neoliberal agenda. With that said, the increasingly narrow emphasis among the more recent entrants shows the PIE Network gradually converging toward a neoliberal agenda—a trend that suggests this broader tension may dissolve in the future—. Whether or not these trends eventually push out or shift the preferences of those organizations that historically advocated for a more expansive agenda remains to be seen and should be an objective of future research.

This emphasis on ideological tension is far from novel. Numerous scholars (e.g., Apple, 2006; Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012) have long emphasized the contradictions and tensions that define movements on the ideological right and left. Our contribution here is to offer empirical evidence of how these tensions unfold in a bounded policy network in the United States. Indeed, as anticipated by organizational field theory (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), we observed that the PIE Network is constituted by incumbent positions favoring the status quo of supporting accountability and standards-based reforms, in addition to alternative positions working to proliferate school choice policies (e.g., charter schools), on the one hand, and maintain a commitment to equity-based reforms (e.g., redistribution of funds to low-income schools) on the other.

These findings also offer insight for understanding neoliberal governance and possibilities for developing alternative visions in these network spaces. There is

nothing inevitable about the link between network governance and neoliberal reform. Although it is clear from prior research that networks are a preferred governance structure among those working to advance managerial and market-based reforms (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012), network governance is also being used across a variety of contexts to facilitate community-based and equity-based reform movements. One such example is the Network for Public Education (NPE) in the United States, which works to connect educators, activists, and other citizens interested in both pushing back against neoliberal reforms and promoting community and equity-based policies.³

Highlighting the inherent tensions within policy networks also points to the need to view these spaces as dynamic and fluid, a point that is consistent with Ball's and Junemann's (2012) theory of network governance. Organizational field theory, too, assumes that transformation is always a possibility given the right conditions (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). While many scholars focus on resource distribution when examining policy network transformation, others are turning their attention to the role of policy brokers to explain these changes. A recent study by Galey-Horn *et al.* (2020), for example, showed that having ties to an idea broker (i.e., an actor who is tied to disconnected alters) was predictive of a shift in policy positions between the time-span of the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations. Future work should explore whether these actors play a role in the transformations taking place within the PIE Network, in particular, and other policy networks more generally. If this structural condition is a consistent feature of transformation in policy networks, then it offers a way for policy analysts to anticipate where preferences will move in the future.

9. References

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³ See: <https://networkforpubliceducation.org>

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