

Habermasian Discourse Theory for Educational Policymaking: Attending to Perspective Taking and Communicative Agency

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Article abstract

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Habermasian Discourse Theory for Educational Policymaking: Attending to Perspective Taking and Communicative Agency

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This paper identifies and considers issues of perspective taking and communicative agency in applying Jürgen Habermas's discourse theory to policymaking in educational settings. The central question is whether Habermas provides an epistemic framework that supports reciprocal and sincere expressions of the views and interests of individuals in a heterogeneous society. Examining this question leads to a discussion of "practical discourse" in light of a willingness of participants to reach mutual understanding and agreement, and the centrality of perspective taking and communicative agency in such discourses. Also examined is a conceptualization of "application discourses," the implications of such discourses for perspective taking and communicative agency, and the role these discourses might play in further assuring the overall inclusivity and context sensitivity of applying education policies in specific circumstances. The paper then gives a brief re-analysis of an empirical study that used Habermas's concept of the "ideal speech situation" as a normative framework for interpreting data. The re-analysis means to illustrate the practical value of practical discourse for guiding and assessing educational policymaking. The paper ends with a short justification of the necessity of attending to perspective taking and communicative agency when viewing education as a basic human right.

Keywords: educational policymaking; practical discourse; application discourses; reciprocity; sincerity; perspective taking; communicative agency; inclusivity; context sensitivity

Practical Discourse: A Rational Reconstruction of Communicative Necessity

Jürgen Habermas argues that justifiable norms and policies can be constructed only through engagement in a specific form of intersubjective deliberation he terms "practical discourse." Such discourse is defined by an attitude of reciprocity and sincerity, and must take place under four "necessary" epistemic conditions: all who might make a relevant contribution must be included, all participants must be granted an equal opportunity to contribute, all participants must mean what they say, and all participants must be free from coercion (Habermas, 1998, 2003, 2008). These idealizing conditions of practical discourse orient participants toward a cooperative form of communication for attaining mutual understanding and agreement in accord with the discourse principle: "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse" (Habermas, 1990, p. 66). In this sense, the four conditions "operationalize" the discourse principle in that they identify the circumstances necessary for engaging in morally justified policymaking – the construction of normative expectations that can claim to be morally valid. Put another way, these are the

conditions of practical discourse that must be satisfied if a norm or policy is to be well-justified and validated by means of intersubjective deliberation.

As such, mutual understanding and agreement on the general acceptability (i.e., moral validity) of governing policies is grounded epistemically in the “necessary conditions” of inclusive, participatory, truthful, and uncoerced communication (Habermas, 1994; Kelly, 2009). These conditions are argued by Habermas to constitute the unavoidable and indispensable presuppositions of a communicative practice wherein interlocutors incorporate the insights and perspectives of an ever-widening sphere of contributors in a search for mutual understanding and agreement on substantive issues of public policy (Rehg, 1997). Habermas’s rational reconstruction of conditions necessary for communicative interactions draws on what must be presupposed by persons seeking to construct a policy that could meet with the approval of all affected. Habermas’s identification of “necessary” conditions is based on rationally discerning and describing the circumstances that must be evident for any communication aimed at mutual understanding to be successful. Communication for the purpose of achieving mutual understanding must be oriented in this specific way if the participants are to avoid engaging in a performative contradiction. The identification of necessary communicative conditions by systematically considering how mutual understanding can be sought without engaging in a performative contradiction forms the “transcendental-pragmatic” underpinning of Habermas’s discourse theory of moral justification, more commonly translated as “discourse ethics.” In turn, the theorizing of communicative conditions provides the conceptual framework for practical discourse as a rationally reconstructed means of guiding and assessing just social policies and actual instances of policymaking (Habermas, 1990, p. 82).

Continuing interest in the potential of Habermas’s discourse theory for educational policymaking is clearly reflected in the academic literature (Ewert, 1991; Foster, 1980; Kelly, 2020; Martin, 2012; Murphy and Fleming, 2009; Okshevsky, 2004, 2016; Smith, Kelly, & Allard, 2016). Equally present, however, are serious doubts regarding the contribution Habermasian perspectives can make to inclusive and context-sensitive policy development and implementation in educational settings. Such doubts are consistent with assessments of Habermas’s deliberative project as offering a reductive and detached view of people’s lives and situations – criticisms that regularly appear in the disciplines of moral and political inquiry. I argue, however, that such concerns can be mitigated by attending to perspective taking and communicative agency during actual cases of practical discourse. Specifically, I examine the reciprocal nature of perspective taking and the importance of sincerity to communicative agency for inclusive and context-sensitive policymaking. Following this, I turn to “application discourses,” as outlined in Habermas’s broader discourse theory, to provide a further means of promoting the overall inclusivity and context sensitivity of education policies. The paper then provides a brief re-analysis of an empirical study that used Habermas’s concept of the “ideal speech situation” as a normative framework for interpreting data. The re-analysis aims to illustrate the practical value of practical discourse for guiding and assessing educational policymaking. The paper ends with a short justification of the necessity of attending to perspective taking and communicative agency when viewing education as a basic human right.

Non-Levelling Perspective Taking in Practical Discourse: Reciprocity

Early formulations of Habermas’s discourse theory are often criticized for failing to ensure that people’s particularities and the relevant aspects of their identity and circumstances are recognized and considered in public deliberation (Johnson, 2001; Young, 1995, 1997). In the work of Ferrara (1988), for example, this criticism is articulated in the claim that practical discourse provides “no adequate role for reflective judgment understood as a capacity to mediate the universal and the particular without eliminating the specificity of the particular” (p. 255). This, in turn, leads to a “lack of context-sensitivity in [Habermas’s] universalism” and the eventual suppression of each person’s sense of identity (p. 251). Honneth (1995) also identifies the potential problem of recognizing the particularity of others in practical discourse. He

argues for supplementing communicative rationality with a sense of “care” for the other as a means of furnishing a richer, more empathetic moral point of view – one that incorporates “the affective impulses of reciprocal recognition” (p. 319). In this way, the specific circumstances of each person can be recognized and “asymmetrical acts” that do not conform to the normative principle of impartial treatment for all persons can be morally justified through deliberation (p. 316). A further conceptualization of discourse as a practice more capable of attending to the particularity of others is offered in the work of Iris Young (1995). Her interest is in articulating “an ideal of asymmetrical reciprocity” that does not obscure “the difference and particularity of the other position” (p. 346). Such an ideal entails that “We mutually recognize one another, and aim to understand one another ... we each must be open to learning about the other person’s perspective, since we cannot take the other person’s standpoint and imagine that perspective as our own” (p. 354). The upshot for Young is that “Normative judgement is best understood as the product of dialogue under conditions of equality and equal respect. Ideally, the outcome of such dialogue and judgement is just and legitimate only if all the affected perspectives have a voice” (p. 360).

Objections to Habermas’s work based on a greater need for attending to personal and cultural identity, situatedness, and individual voice are subtle and varied. There is a certain continuity, however, in many of these objections as taking a common interest in the kind or degree of “reciprocity” that is to take place between individual subjects in discourse. By parsing the criticisms given above, for example, it is possible to identify a common thread of attentiveness to reciprocity. Ferrara claims the aim in discourse should be for reflective judgement that discovers and takes account of the self-contextualization of differently situated actors. Honneth posits care for the other as a precondition of the reciprocal recognition that can generate asymmetrical treatment. For Young, practical discourse needs an asymmetrical reciprocity that does not occlude the difference between participants but allows the equal expression of all voices. Moreover, depending on how closely the concept of reciprocity is linked to recognition, it may be argued that a general agreement exists between Habermas and his critics on the necessity of a reciprocal recognition of others in specific instances of practical discourse. If this is so, then disputes concerning inclusivity and context sensitivity appear more likely a matter of how to meaningfully practice reciprocity to satisfactorily attend to the interests of actual participants. Such a reading of the critics stresses the importance of fulfilling the necessary conditions of practical discourse rather than an outright rejection of Habermas’s project. The practice of a genuinely reciprocal practical discourse, as such, requires that the specific conditions of inclusion and participation be met to the satisfaction of all concerned, that “all the affected perspectives have a voice” (Young, 1995, p. 360). Further, a congruent reading of Habermas and his critics deepens the commitment to collaboration between participants in reciprocal discourses. Inclusion and participation are not simply the level court on which individual responsibility for a reciprocal exchange of perspectives takes place. Instead, they set conditions for a shared commitment to non-levelling perspective taking as an epistemic necessity in the pursuit of mutual understanding.

Habermas’s statements abound concerning the kind of inclusive and context-sensitive reciprocity he is advocating for practical discourse. The following statement by Habermas (1998) well represents his view of a reciprocity that clearly recognizes the interests of other participants:

Generalized reciprocal perspective-taking requires not just empathy for, but also interpretive intervention into, the self-understanding of participants who must be willing to revise their descriptions of themselves and others (p. 42).

Such clarifications convey the importance of attending to mutual recognition and reflexivity during practical discourses. They also highlight the transformative potential of interpretive intervention, as all participants must be willing to reflect on the interests and value orientations of others and themselves alike. This attitude of communicative reciprocity includes and extends beyond self-interest, empathy, or care, and is open to all participants in a collective (i.e., intersubjective) construction of generally acceptable

interests, norms, and policies. This orientation in practical discourse requires a non-levelling symmetry in cooperative acts of communication – a symmetry between all participants that does not attempt to appropriate, assimilate, or create a false sense of sameness, but actively seeks “the inclusion of the other *in his otherness*” (Habermas, 1998, p. 40). In fact, Habermas’s articulation of a reciprocity that is sensitive to the recognition of difference and supportive of diverse perspectives and interests in the construction of justifiable policies prompted Johnson (2001) to suggest that later formulations of practical discourse “have opened up possibilities for a new and productive episode [that] must be seen to rest precisely on its open-ended and dialogic character” (p. 59).

Communicative Agency in Practical Discourse: Sincerity

While the kind and degree of reciprocity called for in practical discourse continues to be refined, concern for inclusivity and context sensitivity should also draw attention to the meaningful enhancement of “sincerity” as a necessary aspect of constructing and justifying policies in education. Attending to sincerity in discourse, especially in the form of truthfulness and non-coercion, brings fuller recognition of its indispensability to all actors seeking mutual understanding and agreement on substantive issues of policy. While engagement in practical discourse requires that particular interests and value orientations be incorporated into the reciprocal construction of generally acceptable policies, sincere self-clarification and honest appraisal of interests and values are also important – though relatively unexamined – considerations in applying practical discourse to educational policymaking. Sincerity in communication is as epistemically necessary as reciprocity for determining options, gaining insights, and generating a sense of understanding and solidarity through discourse. Moreover, when understood in terms of satisfying conditions of truthfulness and non-coercion (i.e., necessary communicative ideals), sincerity supports an authentic and cooperative exchange of perspectives that enhances the communicative agency of all concerned in a search for mutual understanding.

Various conceptions of “agency” have taken shape within several educational disciplines (Brown, 2009; Clark, et al. 2016; Goodman and Eren, 2013). Biesta and Tedder (2007) describe agency as a general “capacity for autonomous social action or the ability to operate independently of determining constraints of social structure” (p. 135). Following this broad description, Klemenčič (2017) contends that the growing interest in “student agency” is a response to a narrow conception of motivation and engagement that, although prevalent in the education literature, “fails to sufficiently address student autonomy, self-regulation and choice ... and reveals very little about students’ capabilities to intervene in and influence their learning environments and learning pathways” (p. 2). In this sense, concern for student agency is meant to extend the aims of formal education to include the cultivation of a person’s capacity for self-directed curricular learning. From a critical perspective, however, this conception of agency appears narrowly focused on attaining predefined learning outcomes. A critical sense of agency needs to further encompass self-determination, self-clarification, and enhanced awareness and willingness to address moral, political, and social issues. Agency must support active participation in understanding and shaping the world as people learn to recognize their own potential as agents of change, and as legitimate contributors and decision makers in determining their personal lives and the life of the community (Basu and Barton, 2010). This critical view is echoed in Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) claim that agency should be understood as an “embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and ‘acted out’ in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)” (p. 963). It is this critical and emancipatory sense of agency that Habermas’s conception of practical discourse promotes – practical discourse requires a high level of communicative agency for all participants.

If practical discourses are to play an emancipatory role in policy deliberations, however, then educational constituents must be satisfied that the necessary communicative conditions are in effect. Communicative agency, for example, depends on the conditions under which it is exercised. It requires actively working to satisfy the conditions of practical discourse by removing barriers to open and undominated expression, and by supporting exploration and examination of interests for all participants. Most importantly, however, communicative agency is dependent on the sincerity of participants in discourse and the satisfaction of truthfulness and non-coercion. A reciprocal exchange of perspectives that lacks sincerity undermines the possibility for communicative agency by misleading participants with false information or impressions. Non-levelling perspective taking is especially vulnerable to breakdowns in mutual understanding from insincere participation because it relies heavily on intersubjective cooperation. In this case, insincerity works against mutual understanding by denying participants the communicative agency that is so essential for interpretive intervention, self-understanding, and revision of their descriptions of themselves and others. In short, sincerity is an indispensable support for reciprocity and communicative agency; it is required for non-levelling perspective taking and intersubjective interpretation: "Since participants are also the ones affected in practical discourse, the relatively harmless presupposition of a sincere and unbiased evaluation of arguments is transformed into the tougher demand to be honest *with oneself* and unbiased *toward one another*" (Habermas, 2003, p. 269; emphasis in original).

Habermas's transcendental-pragmatic account of the conditions of practical discourse is also open-ended enough to provide space for, and to guide further development of, sincere communicative practices that enhance communicative agency. More imaginative self-clarifications and aesthetic self-explorations may have an important role to play in satisfying the condition of truthfulness, for example. Such forms of expression could assist in the identification and articulation of relevant but as yet unexamined personal beliefs and assumptions and truths. Or it may be that a wider range of expressive forms of communication including storytelling, drama, autobiography, and narrative could encourage more authentic participation in practical discourses (Johnson, 2001). To the extent that such forms of expression are practised and familiar to certain participants, they may further present a less coercive and intimidating means of disclosing one's sense of identity and personal circumstances. Such forms of expression and clarification may thereby enhance the communicative agency of contributors to practical discourses, allowing a broader range of sincere communicative actions to enter the search for mutual understanding and agreement on matters of policy.

In this sense, enhancing the communicative agency of participants in practical discourse through creative and authentic exploration of individual perspectives, values, and interests need not focus exclusively on cultivating the discursive competencies of interlocutors. So long as the epistemic necessity of sincerity (and reciprocity) is acknowledged and maintained in practical discourse, the communicative agency and resulting contribution of participants could take many forms and play out in many venues: "argumentative practice that is as inclusive and continuous as possible is subsumed by the idea of continually going beyond the limitations of current forms of communication with respect to social spaces, historical times, and substantive competencies" (Habermas, 2003, p. 102).

Moreover, the inherent expansiveness and susceptibility of practical discourse to admit new forms and forums creates opportunity for the empirical study of educational policymaking. For example, ascertaining the sense, level, and satisfaction of communicative agency experienced by constituents in policymaking provides a natural purchase point for empirical research. Similarly, measuring constituent perceptions of coercion, or identifying perspectives absent from policy discourses, may indicate procedural failures in the provision of appropriate social spaces or sufficient recognition of historical circumstances. A conception of communicative agency grounded in the conditions of practical discourse, thereby, provides a critical framework for guiding and assessing policymaking, and for recognizing and including a diversity of forms and forums for sincere self-expression and interest-clarification. Attending to communicative agency as an empirical consideration could contribute to advancing the practical application of discourse ethics to real-world problems of policy development in education (Foster, 1986;

O'Donnell, 2010). Such research would have a strong philosophical foundation for going beyond the limitations of current forms of communication in educational policymaking.

Application Discourses: Further Opportunities for Perspective Taking and Communicative Agency

With further regard to accentuating the opportunities available for expressing perspectives and exercising agency, Habermas clearly acknowledges major additional considerations beyond the initial construction of policies. Habermas's work with practical discourse and the discourse principle focuses on the construction of justifiable norms and policies under epistemic conditions needed for mutual understanding and agreement. Once a policy is considered sufficiently justified under conditions of practical discourse, it may be accepted as part of a constellation of morally valid policies guiding social interactions. This reservoir of morally just policies can, however, create a need for a "further discursive step" (Habermas, 1994, p. 37). Habermas writes: "The application of norms [and policies] calls for argumentative clarification in its own right. In this case, the impartiality of judgement cannot again be secured through a principle of universalization; rather, in addressing questions of context-sensitive application, practical reason must be informed by a principle of appropriateness" (1994, p. 14). At this step, decision makers and administrators work to identify the most appropriate policy for a given set of circumstances as they move from a procedure of construction to one of application. This further discursive step is articulated in the concept of "application discourses" and a "sense of appropriateness" in applying justified policies to particular cases. Rehg (1997) explains this transition as follows: "At issue is not the justification of a general norm [or policy] but rather the question of which concrete action is warranted in the light of *prima facie* norms and situational particulars" (p. 247).

On this aspect of discourse theory, Habermas enthusiastically endorses the work of Klaus Günther (1993) and often defers to Günther as the foremost authority on procedures for the appropriate application of just policies to particular contexts of action. Unlike Habermas's clear articulation of the conditions of practical discourse, however, Günther provides no strong stipulation of epistemic conditions necessary for application discourses. Rather, his work implies that discourses of application would themselves necessarily take place under the same epistemic presuppositions of argumentation that constitute the communicative conditions of practical discourse. This is implied because both practical discourses and application discourses require argumentative clarification and justification in the formation of mutual agreements. If an application discourse is to result in the appropriate choice and application of a morally valid norm, then the participants cannot dispense with an appeal to the necessary presuppositions of argumentation – the very same epistemic conditions required for reaching mutual understanding and agreement.

As such, the communicative conditions necessary for the possibility of mutual agreement on a just policy still need to be in play in discourses of application – to assure that everyone's interests are understood in the circumstances and that the application of a policy is made appropriately in the specific context. In this sense of appropriateness, the epistemic conditions of reciprocity and sincerity (i.e., inclusion, participation, truthfulness, and non-coercion) assure that discourses of application remain oriented towards understanding and agreement in the appropriate choice and application of just policies. In application discourses, as in practical discourses, the epistemic conditions act to preserve the reciprocity and sincerity inherent in any genuinely inclusive and context-sensitive practice of public deliberation. Together, these conditions furnish spaces for perspective taking and communicative agency in both the construction and application of policy, enhancing opportunity for constituents and decision makers alike to consider what is agreeable in general and appropriate for them in a given situation.

The implications of considering application discourses and the principle of appropriateness in education policymaking and analysis are many. The provision of this supplementary step is an important

resource for addressing concerns over the level of inclusion and context sensitivity inherent in Habermasian discourse theory. In introducing the sense of situational appropriateness, Habermas and Günther clearly acknowledge that people affected by a norm or policy are in an epistemically relevant position to determine its appropriate implementation. They are opening space in Habermas's discourse theory for deliberating on "the right thing to do in the given circumstances" (Habermas, 1994, p. 36). In deciding what is appropriate, however, participants in application discourses are not free to dispense with a point of view framed by reciprocity and sincerity. They cannot, for example, act without considering the interests of others or withhold relevant information if the aim is mutual understanding and agreement on the application of a just policy. Habermas explains, "In discourses of application, the principle of appropriateness takes on the role played by the principle of universalization in justificatory discourses. Only the two principles taken together exhaust the idea of impartiality" (1994, p. 37). In this way, the impartiality that is essential to securing the rational acceptability of a policy is preserved when moving from its construction or justification to its application. Moreover, this further discursive step provides another occasion for the sincere and reciprocal introduction, exchange, and clarification of perspectives within the policy context.

While much additional theorizing remains, Habermas classifies several other types of communicative procedures that could be the foci of inclusive and context-sensitive policy development in education. In addition to practical discourses for the construction and justification of education policies, and application discourses for determining the situational appropriateness of policy and the relevant circumstances for its execution, Habermas introduces conceptions of ethical-political discussion, negotiation of compromises under fair bargaining conditions, and pragmatic implementation discourses (McCarthy, 1991). Common to each of these types of deliberation is "the neutralization of power differentials attached to conflicting interest positions or concealed in traditional value constellations" (p. 192). Important to note, however, is that while each type of intersubjective deliberative practice is bound to its own distinct formal principle that expresses an acceptable outcome, it is clear that the epistemic conditions of practical discourse would still be needed to guide and govern this collection of communicative procedures toward mutual understanding and agreement. That is, the transcendental-pragmatic reconstruction of epistemic conditions necessary for mutual agreement on issues of policy implementation continues to frame each of these proposed types of discourse. Furthermore, practical discourse would remain as the theoretical centrepiece of practices for assuring the inclusivity, context sensitivity, and communicative character of the "whole web" of overlapping communication types (p. 193). For these reasons, the study and enhancement of the communicative conditions of practical discourse, and their advancement and application for policymaking in educational settings, are imperative.

Sketching the Practical Value of Practical Discourse: Assessing and Justifying Opportunities for Perspective Taking and Communicative Agency

Notwithstanding his central role in developing critical social theory, the empirical study and practical application of Habermas's ideas remain sparse within educational policymaking. Important but rare exceptions include Foster (1980, 1986), whose influence is seen in Johnson and Pajares (1996), and Harris (2002), who influenced the work of Milley (2002). In the main, these works refer to Habermas's "ideal speech situation" (a term dating from an early formulation of his discourse theory of morality) as presenting a sound philosophical foundation for educational policymaking practices concerned with democratic reform and giving voice to people traditionally marginalized in public education. Across these studies, the concept of the ideal speech situation is used to assess and critique actual policymaking practices in education. In keeping with the promise of this empirical research, the final section of this paper will sketch the practical value of Habermasian discourse theory as a means of assessing perspective taking and communicative agency in policymaking as it unfolds in a real-world setting. The context for

this sketch will be drawn from the research of Johnson and Pajares (1996), although the information provided in their study will be re-analyzed and interpreted in specific terms of practical discourse and its conceptual resources – many of which had yet to be theorized by Habermas at the time of the original study.

A main aim for Johnson and Pajares (1996) was to use the concept of an ideal speech situation (a situation supportive of communicative action and hypothesized by Habermas to be a universal, cross-cultural practice for attaining mutual understanding and agreement) as “a normative framework for interpreting the attempts to democratize governance in schools” (p. 602). Johnson and Pajares studied attempts to democratize governance over a three-year period at a large high school in the United States. They relied mainly on information gathered in interviews with teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and students at the school. They also observed and documented new decision-making structures and practices, such as school-community meetings, advisory councils, and special interest committees that were intended to support democratic reform. Their analysis identifies several aspects that promote and constrain shared decision-making and open deliberation, two key characteristics of democratic governance and policymaking as defined in the study. The paper concludes with a short series of general observations on the democratic reform of schools as interpreted through the framework of an ideal speech situation.

The empirical research published by Johnson and Pajares (1996) provides an excellent opportunity to sketch the practical value of practical discourse. Using practical discourse and its associated concepts as a normative framework for re-analysis of one aspect promoting, and one aspect constraining, shared decision-making and open deliberation should demonstrate its value for educational policymaking. I will also apply practical discourse to reinterpret some of Johnson and Pajares’s (1996) general observations and conclusions on democratic reform in schools as further means of showing the value of practical discourse for policymaking in education. An important positive aspect identified by Johnson and Pajares “involved the adoption of democratic rules and procedures ... these resulted in increased participation, the creation of new avenues of communication, and the development of a sense of ownership in the proposals adopted” (p. 616). Under a practical discourse analysis, establishing common procedures for deliberation supports wider inclusion and participation by members of the school community. In turn, there are more opportunities for the expression of perspectives and sharing in perspective taking. Common and well-publicized procedures for democratic decision-making also promote communicative agency across the school community insofar as they promote an uncoerced and truthful exchange of ideas, and facilitate wide access to deliberative forums. In this way, “democratic rules and procedures” can create epistemic conditions conducive to communicative agency and a cooperative exchange and understanding of perspectives.

Conversely, Johnson and Pajares (1996) observed a constraint on deliberation when “teachers were unaccustomed to debating issues in an open forum” (p. 618). This constraint was sometimes exploited by self-interested teachers, who engaged in “behind-the-scenes politics” and used their “strong personalities” to dominate deliberative forums and discourage participation. In terms of practical discourse, satisfaction of the four epistemic conditions is necessary for mutual understanding. When the aim of a school community is shared decision-making and open deliberation, those who work to exclude and coerce others engage in a performative contradiction that negates opportunities for mutual understanding and agreement. At the same time, this behaviour erodes constituent satisfaction with the conditions under which they deliberate, replacing it with “much frustration” (p. 618). Left unaddressed, the active exclusion of perspectives from deliberation creates a loss of communicative agency for the entire school community as the diversity of interests and viewpoints narrows.

By the end of their study, Johnson and Pajares (1996) concluded that “when they [teachers] had access to a forum for decision making, they thought more about school-wide problems ... It was clear to us that teachers were beginning to display an attitude of collective empowerment” (p. 621). The sense of enhanced collective empowerment is also described earlier in the paper when the principal of the school is recorded as saying, “The more people get involved, [the more they] pull together” (p. 617). This

sense of the motivational effect of collective will-formation or empowerment is well documented in the educational administration literature, but it is usually expressed in terms of “buy-in” by school-community members for policies made through the sharing of ideas and perspectives (Turnbull, 2002). Members of a school community are far more likely to accept (i.e., buy into), implement, and abide by policies made under conditions of inclusion and participation.

In terms of practical discourse and Habermasian moral theory, the collegial and motivational aspects of inclusive deliberation are discussed at length by Rehg (1997) as “solidarity.” There is a key distinction in conceptualizing “solidarity” as a motivational outcome of practical discourse as opposed to a simple sense of “buy-in,” however. When people have a positive sense of inclusion and participation in making policies (i.e., under satisfactory conditions of practical discourse), they are far more likely to engage in policymaking, and to implement and abide by those policies in solidarity with others. In this way, the collective empowerment or solidarity made available through practical discourse can be a strong and self-fuelling motivator for inclusive policymaking and earnest policy implementation in educational governance. Moreover, this is not simply the effect of buy-in for reasons of self-interest, but a greater sense of solidarity attained through mutual understanding and agreement in policymaking. Perspective taking and communicative agency provide for the recognition of general interests and produce a collective will for realizing those interests. The opposite effect is also evident in the study. When educational constituents feel coerced or deceived or left out of policy deliberations, the potential for collective empowerment and solidarity is lost, along with enthusiasm for policy reform and implementation. In such cases, in which the perspective taking and communicative agency in school communities is limited, “barriers of isolation” and resistance to change undermine even the best-intentioned and possibly beneficial policy reform (Johnson & Pajares, 1996, p. 620).

I hope the sketch above sheds light on the practical value of using practical discourse and its associated concepts for guiding and assessing educational policymaking. A critical question remains, however: Why should we care about perspective taking, communicative agency, or even moral validity in educational policymaking? In a report given to the United Nations General Assembly on September 2, 2022, Special Rapporteur Koumbou Boly Barry offered clarification of the basic human right to education. In characterizing this basic human right, Barry (2022) noted that “The widely accepted ‘4 As’ framework [i.e., ensuring the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of education for all children] provides elements for considering whether the education provided respects the human rights of all learners and adequately incorporates their needs in the education system” (p. 13). The Special Rapporteur further stated in reference to a specific element of the framework:

Acceptability refers to the form and substance of education, including its curricula and teaching methods, being relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality. The State, in consultation with teachers and parents, has an obligation to set and enforce those standards, both in public and private educational settings. This includes due attention to the linguistic, cultural and religious needs of children, in particular for minorities, migrants or refugees. (p. 13)

As the concept of a basic human right to education solidifies, therefore, it has become clear that educational policies should be acceptable to those persons most affected. The state has a moral obligation to provide relevant and appropriate curriculum and instruction – education that is informed by and acceptable to the school community.

Developing these fundamental elements, the form and substance, of the basic right to education aligns with Habermasian discourse theory as a basis for persons seeking to construct policies that could meet with the approval of all affected. Recall the discourse principle: “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (Habermas, 1990, p. 66). It highlights the need for communicative practices that provide for sincere self-disclosure, reciprocal perspective taking, communicative agency, shared understanding, and mutual agreement. These characteristics of practical discourses become necessary

aspects of policymaking for any education system to satisfy its obligation to basic human rights. The basic right to education also calls for communicative forums such as application discourses for determining the situational and cultural appropriateness of policy and the relevant circumstances for its implementation. Again, from a Habermasian perspective, satisfaction of the conditions of practical discourse is the only means available for assuring morally justified policymaking – the construction of normative expectations that can claim to be morally valid. The epistemic conditions of practical discourse must be satisfied if a norm or policy is to be well-justified and validated by means of intersubjective deliberation. If we accept education as a basic human right, and that right obligates us to ensure the acceptability and appropriateness of education for all persons, then satisfaction of the epistemic conditions of practical discourse in educational policymaking remains imperative.

Using practical discourse as a theoretical framework for the analysis of policymaking provides consistent reference points for understanding the epistemic conditions that may or may not be in play in a specific case. The analysis of epistemic conditions can be systematic and sustained, and applied to empirical data (such as interviews) to gauge constituent satisfaction and to guide policymaking practices with a view to satisfying conditions of inclusion, participation, truthfulness, and non-coercion. In turn, the conditions are indicative of opportunities for perspective taking and the degree of communicative agency experienced by members of a school community. This information has value for supporting democratic reform, generating solidarity, and motivating the implementation of policy initiatives. More importantly, practical discourse is a normative framework for guiding and assessing the moral validity of education policies in keeping with the basic right of all people to have their interests and perspectives respected in education.

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