

Management in Education

Towards an analysis of the policies that shape public education

Setting the context for school leadership

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Abstract

The environment in which school leaders and teachers work is shaped by educational policy. Policy is, in turn, derived from the dominant political ideologies at any particular time. The interrelationship between ideology and policy shapes both the overall organization of education and the operational practices and procedures of staff in schools and colleges. An understanding of the nature of policy, how it is derived from political ideology and how policy helps to determine both the organization of education at national, local and school and college level can help school leaders to

develop effective responses to policy and policy shifts. This article offers a model for conducting such an analysis.

### Education policy and policy processes

There can be little meaningful discussion of the policies that shape public education without first engaging with wider questions about the aims and purposes of education, because education policy is ultimately linked to much wider issues of educational purpose, which, in turn is linked to wider political philosophies and ideologies (Adams, 2014). A review of the education policy objectives of governments around the world will often reveal that the provision of more and better quality education has assumed the status of a global orthodoxy, with investment in education being seen as the key factor in determining the ability of nation states to hold their own in a globalized world. Education is perceived to be pivotal to economic success in a global economy in which knowledge is considered the key to competitive advantage. It is clear, however, that policy processes and related considerations of the purposes of education inform the contexts within which school leaders and teachers work. It is important to recognize, therefore, that the work of those within educational institutions and the various ways in which that is experienced cannot be understood without being located in a context that acknowledges the centrality of policy and of the ideologies that shape policy. Such an understanding can facilitate the development of a range of appropriate responses to policy as it impacts on schools and colleges (Aubrey, 2013).

Very often, educational issues are presented as little more than technical ‘problems’ (they are usually presented as problems) requiring a technical solution. With the reliance on parental choice and marketization to improve schools, attacks on teacher professionalism and the almost constant tinkering with the national curriculum (Burgess et al., 2007; Day and Smethem, 2009; Mulholland, 2012; Paton, 2012), there is seldom a real effort to recognize that, whatever the solutions proposed, these are ultimately linked to much wider questions of educational purpose. Such questions are inevitably political as they are fundamentally bound up with wider questions about the nature of society. It is important, therefore, to recognize that, whatever is being considered, whether it is a government minister determining the content of a statutory curriculum, or classroom teachers exercising some choice over what they teach in their lesson the next day, the starting point derives from a much more fundamental set of questions. What is to be taught? What counts as what Apple (2000) has called ‘official knowledge’? Critically, who decides? The first two questions focus on the content of education, but the third question raises a wider set of questions about processes. What are the mechanisms by which educational decisions are made? What is the balance of power between the government minister and the classroom teacher, and who else might have a say in that decision – business, the community, parents, or indeed the student? How should such interests be represented?

Spring (2011: 1) suggests that three overarching questions can frame the parameters within which much educational debate takes place:

What knowledge is most worth teaching?

What are the best instructional methods and school organization for teaching this knowledge?

What should it cost to disseminate this knowledge?

Spring’s questions highlight the contexts within which those working in educational institutions, as leaders and educators, undertake their work. Spring’s first question invites us to consider

educational ends: what is education for and what are its purposes? The second question raises issues of both pedagogy and organizational structures and urges us to consider the most effective means by which the purposes might be achieved. Spring's third question flows from the second and raises the critical issue of resourcing – who gets what, and who pays? It is helpful to start from the openings identified by Spring because only then is it possible to identify the wider political questions that shape policy. None of these issues is value-neutral, and responses are rarely the outcome of consensual discussion. The issues raised can reflect sharply divergent views about the nature of society as it is, and about the future of society as it might be. However, the value differences that underpin these questions are often denied, and the status quo (society as it is) is presented as 'common sense': Education is too often thought of as simply the delivery of neutral knowledge to students. In this discourse, the fundamental role of schooling is to fill students with the knowledge that is necessary to compete in today's rapidly changing world. To this is often added a caveat: Do it as cost-effectively and as efficiently as possible ... A neutral curriculum is linked to a neutral system of accountability, which in turn is linked to a system of school finance. Supposedly, when it works well, these linkages guarantee rewards for merit. 'Good' students will learn 'good' knowledge and will get 'good jobs'. (Apple, 2006: 5)

Apple's argument emphasizes that the politics of education, and the politics in education, are ever present. This, however, is an analysis of politics in its broadest sense – the mobilization of power in order to achieve social and economic objectives. Within this process the politics of education and politics in education are ever present. Our argument is that education policy is based on the political ideologies that shape those objectives which frame much of what happens in individual educational institutions, and it thus shapes the experiences of those who study or work in educational institutions. However, it is important to understand more precisely what we might mean by policy.

One common approach to defining policy asserts that policy corresponds to a set of aims or goals, or statements of what should happen in any given set of circumstances. Such an approach can be located within a pluralist political framework in which policy is often presented as the logical outcome of a problem-solving process. This is clearly articulated by Harman (1984), whose view of policy combines the notion of policy representing a position in response to a problem, and also a statement of what ought to happen when confronting a particular issue or problem. Such definitions of policy frequently acknowledge conflict and power, but this is generally contained within the view that competing approaches to problems can be managed rationally within a policy process that emphasizes problem definition, the generation of alternatives and the identification of solutions through discussion and debate. Thus policy is presented as a linear and sequential process (Jennings, 1977) in which policies pass largely unproblematically from conception to execution.

To view policy in this way is both misleading and unhelpful to those who are required to implement, and whose work is influenced by, such policies. There is, therefore, a need to understand policy in terms that reject the tidy logic of the political pluralists and the period of post-war consensus in the advanced capitalist countries of the West. Challenges to the traditional linear approach to policy analysis can be found, for example, in the work of Bowe et al. (1992) based on the concept of 'policy cycles'. The notion of policy developed through cycles deliberately challenges the sense of an obviously identifiable 'beginning' and 'end' – start- and end-points are generally arbitrarily applied for the purposes of policy analysis.

Bowe et al. (1992) identified the context of influence, the context of text production and the context of practice as the three domains in which policy development might be framed. The context of influence referred to the ways in which policy problems are presented by those seeking to influence them. What is 'the problem'? How is it being defined, and by whom? Whose voices are dominant in

determining how the policy is presented and defined to wider audiences? Whose voices appear to be sidelined, silent or, indeed, silenced?

Within this analysis, policy is not seen as neat and tidy but rather as a messy process in which, at any point in the policy cycle, participants negotiate over future trajectories, outcomes and implementation. Policy can therefore be considered to be the realization of contested meanings. In some cases policies may be relatively inconsequential, uncontentious and largely unproblematic in their enactment. However, in other cases policy may reflect sharp divergences over values, and the consequences may be substantial. In such cases the contested nature of policy is likely to be more overt, with more visible signs of conflict and struggle based on competing sets of values that may be identified in the discourses that shape educational policy. Such values, in their different forms, shape policy discourses. Our argument is that it is these discourses within the socio-political environment that frame the context within which educational leaders and teachers work. There can be no understanding of that context without connecting it to the broader socio-political context.

### Organizing public education – from policy development to policy enactment

In structuring the four-volume work, *Organizing Public Education* (Bell and Stevenson, 2013), we presented our own framework for analysing policy which is derived from our earlier work (Bell and Stevenson, 2006). Within this framework we sought to combine an approach that reflected the importance of central agencies such as governments in driving and determining policy agendas but which also recognized the potential for policy to be mediated, and contested in different ways and at different levels in different contexts. In Figure 1 we set out that framework, which consists of four levels: socio-political environment; governance and strategic direction; organizational principles; and operational procedures and practices. It should be noted that the linearity of this model, with its apparent top-down approach, reflects the predominant ways in which policy is perceived and experienced. This is not to assert that policy cannot be formed from below, or that resistance from below is incapable of fundamentally challenging policy from above; rather it is to recognize the dominant power of the superordinate bodies in framing policy agendas and asserting decisive influence on the way they are experienced. Moreover, within the framework there is no intention to convey a tidy correspondence between the levels within the framework and levels of governance. There is a need to recognize within this framework a tension between the dominance of global discourses and the resistances of local cultural contexts. For example, the role of the nation state is clearly pivotal, but in what ways do the apparatuses of individual nation states relate to the wider questions of global power, and what are the relationships of power between central government and governance at the level of regions, localities and individual institutions?

Figure 1.

From policy development to policy enactment.

The original framework (Bell and Stevenson, 2006) referred to the upper elements of the framework as the domains of policy formulation, and the lower elements as those of policy implementation. In the version presented here these have been replaced with 'policy development' and 'policy enactment', respectively, to avoid the implication that these are discrete elements of a policy process. The use of the term policy 'development' instead of 'formulation' intentionally challenges the notion that policy is made in rational ways, as does 'enactment'.

Ball et al. (2011) refer to complex and hybrid processes of enactment by which different types of policy become interpreted and translated, reconstructed and remade in different but similar settings. Our use of enactment is intended both to incorporate the use made of the term by Ball et al. (2011) and to extend the meaning of the term to convey the contested nature of policy implementation in which expected outcomes and experienced realities are often divergent.

The first element within policy development, the socio-political environment, is the context in which policies begin to be framed. The wider socio-political environment provides the forum for ideological and philosophical debates and contested discourses from which the organization of education is derived. It shapes the context within which policy is framed and enacted and incorporates the emerging discourses of policy development, with a particular focus on the specific way in which policy problems are presented. It is the dominant discourses of the time, therefore, which both formulate the overarching guiding principles and are reflected in educational policies. For example, the continuing policy commitment to accountability, competition, choice and the economic utility of education is derived from a broader commitment to free market economics.

As policy begins to emerge in more explicit form it is appropriate to consider what we identify within the framework illustrated in Figure 1 as governance and strategic direction. The notion of strategic direction refers to the way in which policy trends emerge with increasing clarity from the socio-political environment, and the parameters within which policy is to be established are set and policy priorities are established. This broad policy is developed and enacted within specific policy domains. Hence, quasi-markets, and accountability and control mechanisms such as league tables and Ofsted inspections emerge. Here, policy provides the structure of governance within which the organization of educational institutions is shaped. The influence of major policy discourses can be seen in the establishment of the patterns of governance and the strategic directions within which educational institutions are organized. The boundaries between the analysis of such major policy discourses and how they are manifested are, however, necessarily blurred and even permeable.

Once the structure for the governance of education has been articulated, the concomitant organizational principles begin to focus on the specific ways that policies shape the nature of educational institutions and provide the organizational context within which management and leadership take place. At this stage, policy becomes clearer and success criteria are also articulated with increasing clarity. Targets are set, and patterns of state, local and, eventually, institutional control procedures are established. National responsibility and local flexibility relating to implementation are determined. Different forms of organizational structure – academies and free schools, for example – evolve. The nature of teacher professionalism is challenged (Barber, 2005), and the implications for leaders and managers both of these organizational forms and the policies that frame them in different contexts emerge.

The final element in the framework refers to operational practices and procedures, whereby the governance framework and the strategic direction set within policy is manifest in the daily activities and experiences of those who work and study in individual institutions. The curriculum and modes of assessment are revised and teachers are required to respond to these changes immediately. Institutional policies are developed and secured, and monitoring mechanisms established. These are influenced by many factors such as the nature of the organization and patterns of leadership and management. Here, second-order values mediate policy. This is the point at which policy developed 'up there' is experienced and enacted 'down here' (Stevenson and Tooms, 2010). The linearity within the framework makes clear that these processes are fundamentally top-down. However, that does not deny the extent to which policy is reshaped and contested from below, nor does it minimize the extent to which policy is subject to multiple interpretations based on the specificities of local

contexts, and the nature of the work of educators, of their professionalism and of the procedures deployed to lead and manage. Although the socio-political environment is instrumental in determining the directions of policy, the same socio-political environment is shaped and re-shaped by the interpretations of policy that emerge from the formulation of strategic directions and from the processes of enactment.

This model is both a testament to the complex nature of organizing public education and an attempt to provide a framework for the analysis of policies which shape public education. By applying this model it is possible to explore many different issues, some of the most significant of which are the tensions in the discourses that shape education policy: between globalization and the needs of nation states, for example, and between welfarism and neoliberalism, as well as the competing demands of centralization and decentralization. These tensions and discourses create contested and challenging environments within which the policies, governance, leadership and management of public education, as well as the work of those in educational institutions, are located. How, for example, have schools responded to marketization? At least one analysis suggests that co-operation and collaboration can co-exist with competition (Bell, 2004a). At the same time, alternative strategies can be developed for responding to the emphasis on the economic functionality of education (Bell, 2004b) and for supporting marginalized young people (Simmons et al., 2014). Similarly, a detailed understanding of the relationship between political ideology and the work of teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges can help in developing coping and avoidance strategies in the face of the tensions between educational policy and teacher professionalism (Aubrey and Bell, 2015). This model for analysis of policy as it shapes public education, therefore, is not purely an attempt at theoretical analysis of transnational policy formulation and policy enactment. It is also practical: it provides food for thought and concepts to challenge researchers, together with ideas and possibilities for the further enhancement of the organization of public education, both globally and within nation states.

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