Policy Response: A Critical Engagement

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This paper aims to explore the concept of policy, and to consider what is meant by policy response. We adopt a “critical postmodern perspective” (Nudzor, 2009) on the implementation of policy, viewing policy as both an attempt to solve problems and an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action. We share Ball et al’s (2012, p. 8) conviction that ‘few policies arrive fully formed’ and that the processes of policy enactment ‘involve ad-hocery, borrowing, re-ordering, displacing, making do and re-invention’. However, we also endorse Ball’s (1993, p. 12) view that policies ‘create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed’. Consequently, in this paper we provide an analysis that acknowledges that policy is in part extemporized, and in part the attempt to promote a “de-stated” account of governance.

What is policy?

Understandings of policy have moved beyond viewing it as a discrete entity, merely the output of a political system, to understanding policy as a process that brings certain principles or ideas into practice (Ham & Hill, 1993). Ranson (1995, p. 440) highlights the purpose of policy for governments to ‘codify and publicise the values which are to inform future practice and thus encapsulate prescriptions for reform’.

This viewpoint is in keeping with Olssen (2004, p. 72) when he states ‘Policy here is taken to be any course of action [....] relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources’. A connection is thus made between policy and governance, and more specifically understanding policy in relationship to ‘the exercise of political power and the language [discourse] that is used to legitimate that process’ (Olssen, 2004, p. 72). As Ball (1998, p.124) contends, ‘policies are [....] ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions’. Moreover, because of their nature they go to the heart of the relationship between the state and the welfare of its citizens (Hill, 1996). Thus the concept of policy is entangled with notions of public and social issues, the solutions to these, and the role of the state in providing these solutions. Education policy therefore represents an important site for the ‘playing out’ of political control and authority over the very nature of education, what is its purpose, how it manifests through structures and practices (for example through schooling, curriculum, pedagogy, etc), and what issues it prioritises and neglects (for example standards, equity etc) in different contexts of practice.

Because policy is bound up with a discourse of the state and the exercise of political power, education policy discourses that are supported by governments (either directly or indirectly) tend to
In the global policy arena, over the last 30 years neo-liberal policy discourses have brought specific values and norms to the fore. Milton Friedman (2002, p.p. xiii-xiv), one of the most celebrated neo-liberal thinkers, boasted of the strategy of waiting patiently for a crisis to occur, developing neoliberal ‘alternatives to existing policies’ and keeping them ‘alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.’ In the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s, proponents of neoliberalism have been invited by successive governments around the world to contribute to policy conversations around areas of concern (such as the performance of schools), and via these conversations neoliberals have incrementally marginalised more collective social welfare centred policy responses and ensured that the individualised neoliberal response is the “common sense” and ‘politically inevitable’ position (Friedman, ibid).

Consequently, Ozga and Lingard, (2007, p. 71) note that governmental discourses on equity in education frequently fail to feature, while at the same time a ‘vocabulary of economy, efficiency and entrepreneurship is advocated as if the terms represented agreed values’. Such discourses seek to establish these values as ‘norms which could not possibly be refused and opposed by anyone not being out of his/her senses’ (Sender, 1998, p34). Clearly, such a process is not neutral; as Foucault (1977, p. 49) observes, ‘practices systematically form the objects of which they speak [....] Discourses are not about objects, they do not identify objects they constitute them and in practice of doing so conceal their own invention’. Thus specific education policy discourses are deliberately and constructively (re)used, (re)emphasised and (re)iterated until they enter the public consciousness and become reified.

Moreover in a world of global exchange where countries are increasingly interested in learning about what other states are doing, so a particular discursive and generic international policy response by nation states and national governments can be identified. As Ball (2008) observes:

An unstable, uneven but apparently unstoppable flood of closely interrelated reform ideas is permeating and re-orientating education systems in diverse social and political locations with very different histories. This convergence has given rise to what can be called a generic global policy ensemble that rests on a set of basic and common policy technologies [...] marketisation, managerialism and performativity and [...] the increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives. (Ball, 2008, 39)

Marketisation relates to a move by countries to a system of provision in which decision-making and power is devolved to increasingly diversified types of educational providers drawn from both state, voluntary and private sectors, frequently located in a competitive environment in which recipients of education (students and parents) are given greater choice (Ball, 2008). The policy technology of managerialism is the increasing influence and adaptation of theories, models and techniques from business management into state sector institutions such as schools. Responsibility for the delivery of services is delegated within an organisation with a focus on quality, innovation, problem solving and customer/user satisfaction (Ball, 2008). Performativity is the state increasingly setting institutions a range of targets to be achieved against which they are held accountable and can be measured and compared. In so doing the state no longer directly intervenes in dictating what and how institutions must operate, rather it facilitates a process of indirect governance whereby the actions of institutions are determined by performance (Ball, 2008). Cumulatively, this discursively informed and constructed global policy ensemble of marketisation, managerialism and performativity of education, impacts on individuals, groups and institutions ‘to reconstitute social relations’ (Ball, 2008, pp. 42-43).
In this regard we borrow from Jessop’s (2002, p. 199) term ‘destatization’ to argue that neoliberalism has created a “de-stated” model of governance in many countries, in which individuals are given responsibility for social issues that were, under the previous social welfare model, considered to be the responsibility of the state. Under “de-stated” governance, the state no longer takes responsibility for such things as social mobility, but instead “manages”, or oversees, the operation of the free market which ostensibly delivers outcomes that are favourable to the interests of individuals. The new public management system of central regulation and decentralised operational management (Jones, et al, 2008, p.22) places pressure on social agents to take responsibility for issues assigned to them by government, and we would contend policy, for example such as that on school leadership and equity, which obliges local school leaders to “govern” social justice in the free market society, is an example of this pressure.

What is “policy response”?

The phrase “policy response” brings to mind a dialogue between policy makers, who devise educational targets and programmes, and policy implementers, who respond by putting these plans into action. In recent years, the nature of this dialogue has been examined by researchers interested in socio-cultural dynamics, and in her review of conceptions of policy, Nudzor (2009) identifies three dominant paradigms: (i) the ‘problem-solving’ model positions policy as a ‘document of some sort’ that is created by policy makers and put into practice by implementers (ibid, p. 93); (ii) the ‘process model’ positions policy as ‘a site of struggle, negotiation and dialogue’, with the outcome (e.g. leadership strategies) co-created by makers and implementers (ibid, p. 91); (iii) the ‘theoretical eclecticism’ model positions policy as the ‘exercise of power and language that is used to legitimate the process’ and draws upon the problem-solving model and the process model (ibid, p. 93).

The theoretical eclecticism view of policy, which is favoured by Nudzor, features prominently in literature on power relations in neoliberal democracies. For example, Harvey (2009) describes how governments seek to persuade the populace to accept policy by embedding novel ideas within the existing discourse. He states:

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. (Harvey, 2009: 5)

If Harvey is correct, then policy on such things as school leadership and equity is accepted by implementers only if it appeals to their existing instincts and desires. As stated previously, marketisation, managerialism and performativity are the expression of the global neoliberal
ideology, and it is this ideology that largely conditions our interaction with new ideas, articulating ‘new ways of thinking about what we do, what we value and what our purposes are’ (Ball, 2008, pp. 42-43). The widespread endorsement of neoliberal beliefs ensures that policy consistent with “common sense” is readily accepted or even goes unnoticed. For example, in their study of school leadership and equity in Canada, Goddard and Hart (2007) discovered that policy on leadership for social justice was being tethered to a “common sense” discourse of equality of opportunity that was, the authors claimed, detrimental to minority groups. Although visible to Goddard and Hart (2007), the consolidation of the majority group’s power through the implementation of policy on school leadership and equity was, it seems, invisible to the implementers. It appears, therefore, that if policy makers tether policy to extant “common sense” beliefs, then the ability of head teachers, teachers, governors and parents to interrogate and challenge policy is significantly undermined.

Lumby and Mujis (2013, p. 14) define the state not just as the formal government apparatus, but ‘as the will of the dominant majority that functions both to pursue advantage and to disguise self-interest at a cost to others’, and they claim that interest groups, such as parents and educators, may use policy in a way that ‘sustains current educational inequalities’. When thinking about policy, it is therefore necessary to consider the non-governmental “key actors” who are involved with its implementation, and the nature of their involvement. In their analysis of policy machinery, Bates et al (2011, p. 41) identify how policy ‘ownership’ is considered to be crucial to implementation. This is because a dispersed, rather than top-down, model of implementation is more likely to ensure that various stakeholders (e.g. parents and local authorities) view policy as benign, rather than an alien interloper, and terms such as ‘influential stakeholders’ and ‘policy community’ (ibid, p. 42) are used to describe the multitude of individuals who must be “on-board” with a policy message in order for it to be embraced. Clearly, this view is consistent with Harvey’s (2009) account of the embedding of novel ideas. The conflation of policy with “common sense” and the cultivation of policy ownership is engineered through such things as consultations and conferences, and of course policy documents play a key role in recruiting stakeholders’ support. Interestingly, it has been argued that policy networks, which would include our own European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL), ‘are displacing hierarchy and markets and developing as the dominant mode of governance and social organisation’ (Ball, 2012, p. 7), meaning that we ourselves are playing an increasingly important role in the formation of policy consensus.

Of course, we know that “unappealing” policy is often rejected in democratic societies (consider, for example, the UK poll tax in 1990, which led to riots and the eventual abandonment of this policy). Thus while it is important to acknowledge the discursive dominance and impact of neoliberalism on a national and global level, it is equally important to appreciate that the matching of policy rhetoric with practice is never straightforward. Policy response might be described as highly contextualised, complex and fragmented. In essence, there are no universal ‘truths’ about policy implementation, the journey from principle to practice - even if discursively framed in a particular way - is a contested one which involves institutions and individuals in a process of ‘creative social action’ (Ball, 1998, p. 270). This is a crucial point, as contestation provides a political space in which dominant policy discourses are not simply accepted un-problematically at face value, but may be challenged, nuanced, reformulated, and changed. For this reason, Braun et al (2010, p. 549) talk not of policy response but ‘policy enactment’, which they claim ‘involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation – that is, the translation through reading, writing and talking of text into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices’.
At a school-based level this enactment process reveals the ways in which policy is never simply implemented but ‘interpreted’ and ‘translated’ in a context of time, space, and place. The premise underpinning this is that ‘policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set’ (Ball 1994, p.19). Such a standpoint on policy enactment is significant as it positions head teachers, teachers, governors, parents, and others engaged with educational reform as ‘key actors, rather than merely as subjects in the policy process’ (Braun et al., 2010; 549).

Consequently, while in no way wishing to diminish the power and influence of prevailing dominant neo-liberal discourses in shaping education policy and national policy response, the remaining part of this paper picks up on the notion of ‘creative social action’ (Ball, 1998: 270) to reflect further on the ways in which ‘policy, people, and places interact to shape how implementation unfolds’ (Honig, 2006, p.10) and policy responses occur. In so doing we draw on the education and political science literature, to offer Ten Policy Pronouncements.

- **Firstly**, history and culture are very powerful influences on policy and practice. Each nation or each region within a nation thinks and acts within its history, national ideology, and its own political sense of what is right (Whitty, 1995). Policy ideas are formulated, interpreted and acted upon differently within different nation states (van Zanten 1997).
- **Secondly**, social class, language, religion, ethnicity, the structure of political institutions and the nature of political culture affect the way in which policy is played out (Whitty, 1995).
- **Thirdly**, policy decisions are by their very nature highly political and may be shaped not least by the requirements of staying in office - governments are as much about staying in office and getting elected as achieving particular policy goals (Levin, 2001).
- **Fourthly**, policies may be shaped and crafted not on the basis of any evidence-based research but simply on the beliefs and commitments of policy-makers and their advisers. Fink (2001, p. 227), for example, cites a former UK Education Secretary’s admission ‘that major policy initiatives in England that have influenced countless pupils and teachers were based on personal whim and prejudice’.
- **Fifthly**, policy-making may be substantially shaped by symbolic considerations that may have little to do with the real effects of policies. For example, political talk and action might be intended to shape and then respond to politically created issues and problems as much as to any real practical concerns. Equally, political spectacle might be used to hide policies and actions that might have material advantages for some groups over others (Edelman & Stone, 1988).
- **Sixthly**, policy reforms may be crafted simply to focus on the politically salient; in other words what can be done instead of what might really make a difference (Cohen, 1995).
- **Seventhly**, policies that evolve from the political process are quite often unclear and ambiguous (Levin (2001). As Walford (2003, p. 3) similarly notes, policy texts ‘contain divergent meanings, contradictions and structured omissions’. Moreover, they are to be interpreted and implemented often by institutions and individuals - such as schools and teachers - who have had no hand in their drafting or planning (Braun et al, 2010).
- **Eighthly**, and related to number four, the entire process of policy development and implementation takes place in a wider political context that is constantly changing, multifaceted, and in a constant state of flux. At any one time there is thus a very high probability
of low probability events occurring, which whilst they cannot be foreseen or planned for
nevertheless can have a major impact on policy response and the implementation process
(Dror, 1986).

- **Ninthly**, institutions such as schools possess considerable ability to resist or alter policies to
fit their own dynamics or to maintain the status quo and to avoid change in response to
external demands (Levin and Riffel, 1997). As Braun *et al* (2010) state ‘policy practices are
specific and contextualised. They are framed by the ethos and history of each school’. Moreover,
schools are operating in a complex environment in which they are likely to be
required to respond to multiplicity of policy demands and expectations simultaneously
(Braun *et al*, 2010). Thus the nature of institutional interaction with policy at the local level is
critical in determining policy response and framing its implementation (Darling-Hammond,
1990).

- **Tenthly**, policies are transformed by those who have to turn them into practice (Levin and
Riffel, 1997). Key actors within institutions such as head teachers and teachers within
schools have the capacity – even with nationally prescribed policy initiatives – to alter,
shape and craft policy texts in accordance with their own professional and personal values,
beliefs, understandings and goals (Braun *et al* 2010). As Darling-Hammond (1990, p. 341)
states:

> .......[we need] to understand that top-down policies can "constrain but not construct"
> practice; that local leadership and motivations for change are critical to policy success; that
> local ideas and circumstances always vary (therefore local agencies must adapt policies
> rather than adopting them); and that teachers' and administrators' opportunities for
> continual learning, experimentation, and decision making during implementation determine
> whether policies will come alive in schools or fade away when the money or enforcement
> pressures end.

(Darling-Hammond 1990, p. 341)

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that policy discourses are currently dominated by neoliberalism, which
seeks to normalise such things as managerialism, marketisation and performativity so that they are
accepted as “common sense” propositions. Various theorists (e.g. Foucault, 1977; Ball, 1998; Harvey,
2009) point out that this process of normalisation renders us receptive to further neoliberal policy
that is compatible with existing ideas, values and beliefs in education, but that we are not
necessarily powerless recipients of policy. Indeed, for example Friedman’s (2002, p.p. xiii-xiv)
account of the incremental adoption of neoliberalism provides a model of resistance: by ‘keeping
alive’ alternatives to managerial responses to social justice, educators are able to resist the
wholesale adoption of policy on such things as school leadership and equity that promotes a “de-
stated” account of governance. By utilising their power to interpret and reject managerialist
solutions to inequity, head teachers, teachers, governors and parents – to name but a few of the key actors in education – are potentially in a strong position to carry forward policy that meets with their approval, and to reject that which does not. Of course this assumes a willingness and desire to keep alive alternatives to the prevailing ideology and in some national contexts a certain political space to do so.

References:


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