TITLE:

Teachers and the Policy Reform Agenda. What is Policy?

AUTHOR:

Dr Sham Naidu

DATE OF PUBLICATION:

1 December 2011

Teachers and the Policy Reform Agenda: What is Policy?

Dr Sham Naidu

> Educational practitioners of all kinds (teachers, Local Education Authority advisers, etc.), researchers and academics [must] engage in research which can provide them with an informed, critical, independent and authoritative base to speak against misguided, mistaken and unjust educational policy. (Sikes, 2000, p. xii)

Introduction

Teachers actively engage with policy on a regular basis. They are called upon to constantly construct and interpret policy in their work. A professional approach to policy in the school situation entails teachers interacting with policy, rather than merely responding to it. Teachers should not adopt a position which assumes that they are 'simply the bearers or enablers of policy developed elsewhere' (Lingard, 1996, p. 66). Hill (1999, p. 423) also highlights an active role for teachers in the policy process when he states that typically 'standard government-funded reform programs treat the school as a blackbox: things are done to or for the school, not by it'.

Some teachers strive to 'make sense' of both the inconsistencies and the new ideas when they make daily work decisions. Sometimes they are successful and create quality teaching experiences for themselves and their students; sometimes they throw up their hands in frustration. Many of the teachers make their decisions based on their immediate needs to comply, survive, conform or meet a time constraint. They follow policy directives as this is the easiest pathway, at least some of the time. However, despite numerous efforts to improve schools, few have had significant or enduring effects on teachers' work (Cohen & Ball, 1999). The reason for this, according to Koppich and Knapp (1998), is that translating policy coherence into improved work conditions often seems more elusive and complex than anticipated. Thus, these reform ideas continue to confuse and frustrate teachers.

While policy can influence the nature of teaching and learning, teachers must construct their own understandings of the policy from personal, political and professional standpoints. These processes require a certain level of understanding and skill in manipulating the policy process. Thus, teachers need to have a sound

knowledge of policies and policy processes. With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to present some theoretical aspects of theory because teachers' work is 'guided', if not 'controlled', by policy. Here Ozga (2000, p. 42) makes the point that teachers must 'understand education policy in a theoretically informed way', in order to raise consciousness and expertise in policy matters. Also, a theoretical understanding of policy has the 'capacity to inform [teachers] of their own policy directions and to encourage autonomous, critical judgement of government policy' (Ozga, 2000, p. 5).

This article revolves around the complex task of defining 'policy'. It endorses Ozga's (2000, p. 2) view that 'there is no fixed, single definition of policy'. I present an array of definitions to illustrate this point. Here, I argue that teachers must be aware of these definitions because it provides a valuable background from which to engage in policy.

What is policy?

In these discussions, I look at some different definitions of policy, the purpose being to show that one cannot assign a single or fixed definition to policy. The manner in which one perceives what policy is depends on the perspective of the teacher.

Ozga (2000) maintains that there is a trend for some [teachers] to understand policy in a linear fashion, that is, in a straightforward fashion. Researchers adopting this stance are merely seeking to understand how governments achieve certain outcomes. For Ozga (2000, p. 2), policy is a 'process rather than a product, involving negotiation, contestation or struggle between the different groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy making'. Further, Ozga (2000) informs us that policy is evident in all aspects of education. It is not confined specifically to the level of central government. This in turn opens doors for engaging in policy research at the micro level. The implications for teachers engaging in policy at this level is of paramount importance. In Ozga's words, 'such research can act as a commentary or critique of "official" research outputs, and assist those who implement or mediate policy to orient themselves in relation to official research claims' (2000, p. 2). Whilst agreeing with Ozga, I believe that this is easier said than done because many teachers are caught in a quandary as to the meaning of policy. This is a result of them having 'been increasingly excluded from the process of policy production since the late 1980s'

(Blackmore, 1998, p. 25). Also, many teacher researchers engaged in policy analysis come from different schools of thought; many have personal reasons for engaging in policy analysis; and many research problems in education policy in different and unique ways.

Ozga (2000) maintains that these factors have contributed to the conflict of interest in the field of policy analysis. As a result, the policy terrain has become a contested one. An important point of contestation revolves around the debate of 'how' and 'by whom' in policy. In other words, how should education policy be defined? By whom should education policy be defined? These concerns are exemplified by Ozga (2000) who questions:

- Is policy research that which is relevant and useful to policy makers (and how do we define useful and relevant, let alone policy makers?) or
- Is policy research properly concerned with critical and independent analysis of education policy making; in other words, with making policy in education the subject of scrutiny? (p. 4)

The above has serious repercussions for policy analysis. In whose interests and for what purposes should education policy research be done? What are the implications for teachers? Are teachers part of the policy scenario? Teachers, by virtue of their profession, are daily engaged in policy. The curriculum, the school policy and their performance in the classroom are all subject to a range of policies and directives. By engaging in policy do teachers become policy researchers? If they do, what does this involve? Are they engaging in reflective practices, based on research, about their teachings? Are teachers afforded the opportunity to scrutinise departmental policy and voice their criticisms without fear of victimisation?

Goodwin (1998) offers some partial but relevant answers to some of these questions. He states that, while all schools are being caught within a complex web of government legislation and policies, teachers see themselves as powerful decision makers with regard to policy. Some schools have been constantly developing policies and practices that had not been formalised and published at a central level until several years after the school had developed its own policies. In some instances, policy makers may not even be aware of certain problems until the needs of students have been articulated and managed in schools through locally-developed policies and

practices. Also, teachers faced with problems make use of their human networks and practical experiences to guide their actions and not by policy statements (pp. 2–6).

Blackmore (1995) has also contributed to the policy debate by identifying five key findings that have emerged from research in policy studies over the past two decades:

1. Policy is a process not just a product;
2. Recognition of the action oriented bottom-up perspective which sees those working at the workplace as also informing and making policy;
3. Policy changes in the very process of implementation;
4. Policy should be seen more as a pattern of actions over a period of time rather than a specific document;
5. Policy is as much a study of non-decisions as of decisions. (p. 294)

According to Yanow (1995, p. 111), what Blackmore has identified is an underlying assumption of post-positivistic approaches to research in policy studies. 'Meaning is not something that can be taken for granted—that the creation, communication, and understanding of meaning require attention'. In terms of policy analysis, a focus on meaning has important implications:

> Policy meanings are important, but understanding these meanings are not simple: it requires deliberate efforts of interpretation. Policy interpretations ask not only what a policy means, but also *how* a policy means. Interpreters often discover that for both questions, the answer is plural: a policy means more than one thing, and those meanings are conveyed in more than one way. (Yanow, 1995, p. 111)

Thus, the construction of meaning by policy researchers is influenced by discourses that are understood either implicitly or explicitly. Policies will be constructed and interpreted to suit particular interests and epistemological sets of researchers at different stages of the policy process (Yanow, 1995).

Having elaborated on Ozga's (2000) definition of policy and discussed some of the contestations in educational policy analysis, I now turn my attention to other definitions of policy as espoused by some policy theorists.

Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997, p. 5) describe policy as 'an instrument through which change is mapped into existing policies, programmes or organisations, and onto the demands made by particular interest groups'. They further add:

> With policy it is also possible to articulate, re-articulate or institutionalise the manner in which particular issues might be understood . . . policies serve to manage change, but exactly how this management occurs varies greatly from policy to policy and site to site. (p. 5)

They used a vignette of teachers' stories to highlight some pertinent issues prevalent in this area. They state that attention should be paid to the following important characteristics of policy, because 'teachers are expected to put policies into practice, so the issue of the ways in which teachers understand policies is of utmost importance' (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 6). According to the latter theorists, the important characteristics of policy are:

- *Policy is more than text*

  Policy refers to more than just a policy document or text. Policies cannot be analysed in terms of the words they are written in. The context in which the policy was written must be acknowledged. 'Policies are thus dynamic and interactive, not merely a set of instructions or intentions. They represent political compromises between conflicting images of how educational change should proceed' (p. 15).

- *Policy is multidimensional*

  Teachers' stories can be presented from many different perspectives. This leads them to state that each policy player contributes to the way in which a policy develops and 'works'—in other words, to policy outcomes. 'Not all influence this process equally; often there is conflict and contradiction between the perspectives or interests of those involved, and not all players benefit equally' (p. 15).

- *Policy is value-laden*

  They hold the view that 'values permeate policy processes' (p. 15). Each role player in the policy process attaches his/her own value to a particular policy.

- *Policy exists in context*

  The vignette of teachers' stories they narrate is incomprehensible in isolation. 'There is always a prior history of significant events, a particular ideological and politic climate, a social and economic climate which together influence the shape and timing of policies as well as their evolution and their outcomes' (p. 16).

- *Policy making is a state activity*

  They advocate that 'education policy making belongs to the realm of public or social policy—a state (or government) activity' (p. 16). The state is a complex entity. Policies have to 'run the gauntlet of the differing agendas, interests and

expectations of different departments or even units in departments' (p. 16). Furthermore, policies are often shaped by the interactions between the state, the economy and society.

- *Education policies interact with policies in other fields*

  Very often, school-based policies are connected in some way with broader policy developments. Examples cited are 'the links between distance education and rural development projects, between anti-racism policies and international forums on human rights, between vocational education and training and labour market policies' (p. 16).

- *Policy implementation is never straightforward*

  They argue that 'implementation of policy is often viewed as the link between policy production and policy practice' (p. 16). They strongly believe that a linear model of policy implementation does not work and that government decree alone cannot bring about changes so desired in education.

- *Policies result in unintended as well as intended consequences*

  They are of the opinion that 'policy making is a precarious business' in which the researcher cannot predict the consequences because of the 'complex interrelationship of contextual factors', the heterogeneity of interests, 'linguistic ambiguities' and the diverse people involved in policy processes (p. 17).

Identification of the above characteristics has led Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997, p. 24) to conclude that 'policy is both a product and a process' (p. 23) and that 'policy processes are ongoing and dynamic'. Thus, they concede that arriving at a definition of 'policy' is not an easy task and stress that:

> Policy is much more than a specific policy document or text. Rather, policy is both process and product . . . policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text and processes of implementation into practice . . . we see policy processes as being more complex, interactive and multi-layered. (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, pp. 24–25)

Mention of 'a two-way interactive, top-down and bottom-up approach to policy development processes' by Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997, p. 25) introduces another dimension to policy processes. This further complicates the issue of definition.

Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992, p. 20) term the abovementioned approach as the 'policy cycle'. Within this cycle, they refer to three interrelated contexts: the context of policy text production, the context of practice and the context of influence. Furthermore, Ball (1994a, p. 26) has added two further contexts to the policy cycle conceptualisation: the context of outcomes; and political strategy. He emphasises that:

> Policy is both text and action, words and deeds; it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to the 'wild profusion' of local practice. (Ball, 1994, p. 10)

This definition offered by Ball (1994) serves to illustrate the complex nature of policy. Policy involves more than just text, words and deeds. To demonstrate the complex nature of policy, Ball (1994) advocates the use of more than one theory to explain the intention of policy, how it is interpreted and acted upon by different agents, how people utilise policy as well as to ascertain what agendas are being promoted or repressed. For Ball (1994), the latter mentioned issues are all part of policy processes.

Thus, Ball (1993, p. 10) states that within the genre of policy research, defining 'policy' is difficult because 'frequently analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy. The meaning of theory is taken for granted'. I concur with Ball, for my readings on the educational literature within a number of disciplines also suggest that there is no single or watertight definition that can be attached to policy, thereby making this a very controversial task.

In addition to Ball's (1993) argument, I also believe that Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) definition of policy aptly describes some of the traditional and different meanings of policy:

> Policy as a label for a field of activity, policy as a general expression of general purpose of desired state of affairs, policy as specific proposals, policy as decisions of government, policy as formal authorisation, policy as a programme, policy as output, policy as outcomes, policy as a theory or model and policy as process. (pp. 13–19)

In a similar fashion, most postmodern definitions of theory reveal that policy is primarily concerned with issues related to 'intention and actions' that promote certain 'values' in order to bring about desired 'changes' in individuals. However, Taylor,

Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997, p. 24) inform us that many definitions of policy are misleading because they convey the message that 'there is general agreement when policies are generated and that they are implemented in a straightforward and unproblematic way' (p. 24). What these theorists argue for is a 'definition which reflects the political nature of policy as a compromise which is struggled over at all stages by competing interests' (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 24).

McIntyre and Wickert (1999, p. 1) make the point that policy has received a great deal of theoretical attention in recent years. They state that 'policy has become the great qualifier—it is now possible to talk not only about policy analysis and policy intellectuals but also about the policy process, policy production, policy managers and policy activists, about policy cycles, policy texts and policy discourse'. This, indeed, opens new avenues for discourses relating to policy. However, discourses of the latter are indeed complex in nature and can present an array of interpretations of policy, as I have illustrated, that are dependent on individual pedagogical stances of teachers or researchers. Thus, educational research and policy are themselves domains of practice which need to be opened up to theorisation and critique.

Conclusion

Teaching is more than the application of predefined methodologies. As such, teachers are an important voice in the matrix from which emerge policy decisions and allocations for the planning, design, implementation and assessment of educational reform efforts. Therefore, teachers must be seen as an important contributing part of the policy community and not merely as medium through which policy is implemented. Policy makers must be responsive to the context in which teachers are working. Since the 'policy spaces' in question here are the schools themselves and it is the teachers who must ultimately find ways to fit policy to a given 'policy space', the degree to which teachers are able to participate in the ongoing policy debate may have a significant impact on the extent to which policy can be successfully implemented in schools. Allowing teachers to serve as an intermediary between the real-world settings of schools, which are characterised by multiple and often conflicting interests, and the development of policy itself seems a necessary precondition for the successful implementation of educational policy.

Whilst the contributions of the policy makers are essential, teachers at the school level must be able to define what information and policy recommendations are relevant and, at the same time, provide a methodologically sound basis for action at a given setting. Thus, it is imperative that teachers 'understand education policy in a theoretically informed way' (Ozga, 2000, p. 42).

References

Ball, S. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse*, *13*(2), 10-17.

Ball, S. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Blackmore, J. (1995). Policy as dialogue: Feminist administrators working for educational change. *Gender and Education*, *7*(3), 293-313.

Blackmore, J. (1998a). *Self-managing schools, the new educational accountability, public education and the educative state*. Paper presented at the Annual Harry Penny Lecture, Centre for Public Education, University of South Australia.

Bowe, R., Ball, S., & Gold, A. (1992). *Reforming education and changing schools*. London: Routledge.

Cohen, D.K., & Ball, D.L. (1999). *Instruction, capacity and improvement*. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Goodwin, N. (1998). *Doing what we're told, or telling them what we're doing: A practitioner's view of schools as policy makers*. Paper presented at the Second International Practitioner Research Conference, University of Sydney.

Hill, P. (1999). Supplying effective public schools in big cities. In D. Ravitch (Ed.), *Brooking papers on educational policy* (pp. 419-462). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Hogwood, B., & Gunn, L. (1994). *Policy analysis for the real world*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Koppich, J., & Knapp, M. (1998). *Federal research investment and the improvement of teaching 1980-1997*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Kumashiro, K. K. (2008). The seduction of common sense: How the right has framed the debate on America's schools. In W. Ayers (Ed.), *The teaching for social justice series*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lingard, B. (1996). Education policy making in the postmodern state: On Stephen Ball's education reform: A critical and post-structural approach. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *23*(1), 65-91.

McIntyre, J., & Wickert, R. (1999). *Research for policy as practice*. Paper presented at the 7th Annual International Conference on Post-compulsory Education and Training, organised by the Centre for Learning and Work Research, Griffith University, Surfers Paradise, 6 - 8th December 1999.

Ozga, J. (2000). *Policy research in educational settings: Contested terrain*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Sikes, P. (2000). Series editors' preface. In J. Ozga (2000), *Policy research in educational settings: Contested terrain* (pp. ix-xiii). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Taylor, S., Rizvi, F., Lingard, B., & Henry, M. (1997). *Educational policy and the politics of change*. London: Routledge.

Yanow, D. (1995). Practices of policy interpretation. *Policy Sciences*, *28*, 111-112.