

TITLE:

Teachers and the Policy Reform Agenda: Becoming Policy Aware, Policy Wise and Policy Active.

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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

Leading on from my article entitled: *Teachers and the Policy Reform Agenda: The Changing Emphasis in Educational Policy Analysis* (African Higher Education Research Online – 2011), the primary purpose of this article is to make teachers policy aware, policy wise and policy smart. 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 chapter 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).

Thus, this article focuses on teachers' involvement in the policy arena. Here, I illustrate that traditionally teachers have been, to a certain degree, involved in policy processes. However, the degree to which this happens today, especially in the construction of major educational policies, is questionable. In my opinion, teachers have been marginalised from the main policy arena. Thus, in order for them to reclaim their voices in policy, I offer some suggestions that will enable teachers to become policy aware, policy wise and policy active in policy processes both at the macro level and the micro level.

Becoming policy aware, policy wise and policy active

In this discussion, I argue that there is a greater need for teachers to be fully involved in educational policy processes. I firmly believe that failure to accord teachers with more influential policy roles increases their feelings of alienation in policy processes, as is currently the situation, and it also decreases policy effectiveness. The central thrust of my argument here is that teachers should be given a greater say in the policy processes.

Presently, public education policies require that teachers merely implement policy within a pre-determined environment. Teachers, by virtue of their work, are engaged on a daily basis in policy issues. Working with policy, teachers must develop

strategies to achieve their goals and survive in the system. They must continually examine the parameters that define the nature of their relationships and the structure of their work environment. Thus, in order to support or oppose educational change, teachers must share their thinking and experience with others, contribute to the formation and formulation of educational policy, and exercise their rights to influence public choices (Winder, 1989; Fasno, 1990). To do this effectively, teachers must 'become policy aware, policy wise and policy active'. However, this does not mean that teachers have traditionally been unaware, foolish or inactive in policy processes.

The following studies bear testimony to this fact that teachers are trying more and more to participate in decision making:

- Verhoeven's (1982) study of Belgian teachers revealed the want for greater participation in pedagogical policy. However, Mahieu's (1989) study revealed that most Belgian teachers wanted a greater say in organisational policy.
- Smylie (1992) disclosed that American teachers were keen to participate in curricular and instructional decisions and in staff-development decisions. However, these teachers were least willing to participate in general administrative and personnel decisions.
- In another American study by Rice and Schneider (1994), teachers reported that they had very little say in managerial and school-wide issues in comparison to technical and instructional issues.
- Krantz and Murphy (1994) asked secondary school teachers in Canada about their satisfaction with their involvement in the decision-making process in their school. The interviewees were dissatisfied with their involvement in all general decision-making activities, except for the involvement of staff in the selection of teachers.
- Ingersoll (1996) has shown that the amount of power held by teachers makes a positive difference in how well schools function, but the effects depend on the types of school activities over which teachers have influence and autonomy.

As argued previously, policy encapsulates a multitude of meanings and its use is determined by a variety of perspectives. Policy also comes in various guises, ranging from a broad-based statement of intent or philosophical stance to a totally developed

system structured on a philosophical base (Fasno & Patterson, 1988). It can also mean that educational priorities, goals, decisions, rules for decision making and guides to practice are enforced by policy in response to common situations. In essence, policies determine the perennial question of ‘who gets what, when and how’ (James, 1981, pp. 80–89).

If teachers want to ensure that they get what they professionally want, and when and how they want it, they need to become involved in policy debates. They need to understand the anatomy and physiology of the policy processes at all levels of development and implementation. They must be able to articulate their position in terms that can be meaningfully received by policy makers and decision makers (Winder, 1989).

Croll, Abbott, Broadfoot, Osborn and Pollard (1994) suggest four ways in which teachers can achieve the above in educational policy matters:

1. Teachers must demand to be treated as equal partners in education policy making whereby they are afforded the opportunity to contribute pluralistically to policy making at all levels.
2. Teachers must reject the notion that they are merely implementers of policy. Failure to do so will create the impression that teachers endorse centralised, bureaucratic and hierarchical policies.
3. Teachers should resist educational reform policies that are detrimental to their own and their students’ welfare.
4. Teachers must be seen as policy makers in practice. They must skilfully mediate policy, through their professional practice, in ways that may amount to ‘new’ policy creation (p. 334).

Policies are the determinants of developments and direction; they are the basis for resource allocation, curriculum determination and accountability measures. Lack of activity in this area will eventually result in the loss of professionals to pursue their ideals and goals. Raising the level of involvement and activity in the policy area might be the solution. However, this is not enough. What also must be improved is the level of understanding and skill in manipulating the policy process. To optimise the

effect of their contribution to policy debates, teachers need to have an understanding of policies and policy processes and be able to present their work in terms that can be meaningfully understood by policy experts and decision makers (Fasano & Patterson, 1988). Furthermore, teachers should also have a comprehensive understanding of functions, such as those involved in power relations, economic pressures, influences of values and beliefs, historical factors, and the management of organisations (Ham & Hill, 1983; Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). All this would exist to develop understandings of the complete policy process from formation to evaluation.

Also, as the demand for educational change increases it will be no longer a viable option to adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude to policy development. Teachers must become increasingly aware of the effects of policy on their professional discipline. This awareness, combined with heightened understanding of policy process research, will provide the basis for effective functioning in the policy area, thereby dispelling the myth that teachers are incapable of effectively engaging with policy (Kemmis, 1995).

Silberberg (1998) suggests several ways in which teachers can enhance their professionalism in the policy process:

- Teachers must develop more formal skills in formulating research questions and conducting school-based research.
- Teachers must endeavour to be seen as an important contributing part of the policy community, and not merely as a medium through which policy is implemented.
- Teachers must be willing to expand the scope of their policy and action roles.
- If teachers are to become producers of research and policy, they must understand how to evaluate claims, because to produce knowledge in either of these domains requires building on previous work in a selective and critical manner.
- The ability to collect and evaluate school data is a precondition to implementing and assessing the effectiveness of policy decisions. The degree to which teachers can effectively conduct research in a systematic and communicable fashion will be imperative.

- In making decisions regarding schools and schooling, teachers must evaluate the alternatives, not only in terms of their own preferences, but in terms of the consequences of choosing each alternative.
- To assess whether their research findings are reliable, teachers must establish an ongoing dialogue with professional researchers and policy makers. (pp. 1–4)

Furthermore, teachers should not shy away from asking questions like: ‘Am I aware of most of the policies operating at my school?’; ‘Are there any policies with which I am concerned?’; ‘What policy changes or additions can I suggest?’ and ‘Do I have the power to change these policies?’. This will lead to a profound transformation, where the teacher will grasp meaningful levels of understanding between knowledge and practice, thereby becoming a constructivist teacher, transforming the schools and school systems in which he/she works. This in turn will expand the ability of teachers to confront critically the problems associated with mandated educational policies.

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). Only then will they become Policy Aware, Policy Wise and Policy Active.

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