TITLE:

Teachers and the Policy Reform Agenda: The Changing Emphasis in Educational Policy Analysis.

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DATE OF PUBLICATION:

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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: What is Policy?* (African Higher Education Research Online – 2011), the primary purpose of this article is to narrate the changing emphasis in educational policy analysis.

To recap, 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).

I am of the opinion that a theoretical understanding of policy will also enable teachers to comprehend and critically question the changing emphasis in educational policy analysis. It is for this reason that the discussions presented in this article illustrate the manner in which policy theorists have shifted their emphasis from macro level analyses to micro level analyses. These shifts shed more light on the manner in which present educational policies, for example, performance management, are being analysed. This serves as an inquiry base for teachers to engage in micro level analyses of policies. After all, teachers 'can make or break policy' (Parsons, 1995, p. 263).

The changing emphasis in educational policy

A major point of contention in education policy analysis presently is the increasing resistance to the separation of the 'formulation' and 'implementation' phases of policy analysis. Advocates of this move, for example, Cibulka (1996) and Malen (1994), maintain that what is important now in policy analysis is research that examines the practices, effects and consequences of policy at the micro level. This new concern has resulted in a shift from previous concerns associated with determining the policy intentions of policy makers at the macro level. In order to reflect this change of emphasis, I narrate the trends that have occurred in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1970s, Kogan (1975) maintained that education policies were intent on prescribing what schools and teachers could do. In this instance, policies were totally authoritarian in nature. For Kogan (1983, p. 99), these policies were based on 'central preconstruction and installation'.

In the 1980s, Ham and Hill (1984, p. 11) maintained that policy analysis focused on ascertaining the causes and consequences of government policy initiatives, more so in the area of policy formulation. What they pointed to were the interconnections between more conventionally defined stages of policy formulation and implementation to describe policy as 'advocacy or salesmanship' (1983, p. 6). Ham and Hill (1984, pp. 174–189) go beyond the surface of organisational power, to show how the policy process is shaped by society by analysing the deeper processes which influence the surface levels of public policy in its agenda, decision and delivery phases.

For Codd (1988, p. 235), policy was 'any course of action (or inaction) relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources'. He argued that policy was the process by which governments exercised power by the use of specific language contained in policies. To elaborate:

> Policy documents can be said to constitute the official discourse of the state (Codd, 1985). Thus policies produced by and for the state are obvious in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs that work to mask social conflict and foster commitment to the notion of universal public interest. In this way, policy documents produce real social effects through the production and maintenance of consent. (Codd, 1988, p. 237)

The trend in the 1990s shifted to analysing policy from a 'recipient' point of view. Ball's theoretical arguments on policy were concentrated on ascertaining the manner in which individuals (teachers) and groups (schools) actually responded to policy. What Ball actually did was to 'challenge the separation of policy, politics and practice' (White & Crump, 1993, p. 415), by determining how people interact, interpret and develop policy. Ball's 'policy cycle' approach to policy analysis served to challenge traditional policy research and thinking.

This in turn stimulated great debate about the usefulness of a 'state-control' or a 'policy cycle' approach to policy analysis. In other words, the debate revolved around

whether a 'state controlled' approach, which was seen as 'technocratic and managerialistic in orientation and concerned mainly with implementation questions' (Lingard, 1993, p. 36), was more useful than a 'policy cycle' approach that 'draws attention to the work of policy recontextualization that goes on in schools . . . [one that investigates] contexts of influence, policy text production, and practice' (Gale, 1999, pp. 403–404).

In the next discussion, I present a brief overview of 'state-controlled' approaches to policy analysis and then proceed to discuss the 'policy cycle' approach in detail. The purpose of these discussions is to provide teachers with two different paradigms which might be useful in analysing policy.

'State-controlled' approaches to policy analysis

In terms of the state policy sociology in education, Dale (1989, p. 25) has applied neo-Marxist theorising to the relationship between the state and education in capitalist societies in order to better understand the nature of education stability and change and explain the basic problems facing education systems in capitalist countries. Dale (1989, p. 25) justifies his stance by stating that such an approach can 'explain patterns, policies and processes of education in capitalist societies more adequately than existing approaches'. In particular, Dale draws on Offe's theory of the state in which Offe's distinction between conjunctural and structural policy conditions is used to explain the formulation of educational policies.

To elaborate, Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) state that Offe's work:

> provides an account of the state in capitalist societies as a set of institutions which has to balance irresolvable tensions between the need to ensure the economy continues to function in a satisfactory fashion so that the state revenues can be generated, and the need for the state to respond to political and democratic demands upon it for policy coverage. (p. 30)

Offe (1975, 1984) maintains that the state is unable to 'solve' problems that arise but it engages in processes designed to diffuse these tensions 'between what [he] calls "accumulation" and "legitimation" functions of the state' (cited in Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 30). Furthermore, Offe (1975, 1984) argues that 'the state structures mediate the policy process, "determining" to some extent what issues get on

to the policy agenda and how [to determine], the possible policy options available and policy outcomes' (cited in Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 30).

Dale (1989) has recognised that the advent of the market ideology and practices within education in recent years has had significant implications for the nature and role of the state in western capitalist societies. The resurgence of classical economics and the ideology of self-interest have weakened the role of the state in the market sphere and have reconstituted the state's administrative practices along managerialist lines (Lingard, 1993, p. 25).

Dale's (1989) position has been critiqued by a number of writers in the field of policy sociology. Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992, p. 7) argue that Dale portrays policy 'generation' as remote and detached from 'implementation'. In this instance, policy is seen as linear and as something which 'gets done' to people by a command of implementers whose roles are clearly defined in legislation. In other words, Dale's position is seen as functionalist. Lingard (1993a, p. 43) also points out weaknesses in Dale's position—mainly in terms of its aggregated notion of the state and in its gender and race blindness—arguing that they stem from broader weaknesses in the Offean perspectives he utilises. Nevertheless, Dale (1992, p. 388) asserts that 'a focus on the state is not only necessary, but the most important component of any adequate understanding of education policy'.

The policy cycle approach to policy analysis

The policy cycle approach to policy analysis was conceptualised by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) to reject previous models of education policy which separated the generation and implementation phases of policy. Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) argue that the previous models ignored the struggles over policy and reinforced a managerialist rationality. Ball (1993, p. 10), in justifying his stance on policy, stated that 'for me, much rests on the meaning or possible meanings that we give to policy; it affects "how" we research and how we interpret what we find'.

Thus, according to Lingard (1996, p. 66), Bowe, Ball and Gold theorised a policy cycle approach that emphasised the contexts of influence, how policy texts were produced and practised, whist 'rejecting a straightforwardly linear and top-down

educational management conception of policy/implementation relationships'. In other words, policy is best thought of as texts constituted by discourses. Policy is thus seen as a representation which is encoded and decoded in complex ways. Policy texts may be 'readerly' or 'writerly', according to the degree of interpretation allowed to the reader, but always and inevitably texts are interpreted and thus contested, adopted and adapted in different contexts of work. Thus, policy is constantly being made or remade at different educational sites. This approach provided a better understanding of the complexities of the relationships involved in policy. Also, it provided opportunities for looking at specific policies in their specific contexts. Ball (1994) argues that the 'policy cycle' approach gives some 'conceptual structure' to the 'policy trajectory studies' which 'employ a cross-sectional rather than a single level analysis by tracing policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state itself through to the various recipients of policy' (cited in Lingard, 1996, p. 66).

Thus, Ball (1994) viewed policy analysis as a process that identified policy as an interactive process, rather than an end product that involved a 'cycle'. This policy cycle approach adopts more of a postmodern orientation that highlights the complex and contested nature of education policy. In this model, policy is viewed as cross-sectional with multi-dimensions, all of which influence and effect policy objectives and policy outcomes. In addition, this model also encourages researchers to look at specific policies in their context. For Ball, the conceptual structure is the macropolitics of the restructuring postmodernist state.

This policy cycle that Ball (1994) mentions also allows for the recontextualisation of policy and thus provides a clearer understanding of how the intent of policy is negotiated at different levels of a hierarchical system. From this viewpoint, policy involves a trajectory.

A policy trajectory consists of the context of influence, which involves the struggles by different agencies in the construction of policy and its discourses; the context of policy text production, where the policy is put into text and may contain inconsistencies and contradictions; and the context(s) of practices, how policy is interpreted and enacted, or not (Ball, 1993). Ball (1994) later advocated that the policy trajectory should also encompass two additional contexts. These included the context of outcomes, which is concerned with the issues of justice, equity and

individual freedom; and the context of political strategy, which relates to the political and social activities that are supportive of the causes and struggles involved in equalities. Applying a policy trajectory model to policy analysis highlights the complexities, constraints and the contested nature of the processes surrounding policy. It is for this reason that teachers and researchers need to develop more sophisticated understandings of policy to make meaningful contributions to educational practice in all its forms.

Reid (1998, p. xii) endorses Ball's viewpoints. He believes that Ball's observations alert us to the dangers of making simplistic assumptions about the development, implementation and the effects of educational policy. 'We need to be aware of the struggles over policy that occurs in various contexts such as the education bureaucracy and school sites. We also need to recognise the fact that education systems and schools are state apparatuses' (Reid, 1998, p. xxi).

A critique of Ball's policy cycle approach to policy

Whilst I advocate that the use of Ball's policy cycle approach to policy is an appropriate and apt 'tool' to aid a better understanding of engagement with policy, his approach has not escaped criticism. In this section, I present some of the critiques offered by other policy theorists with regard to Ball's policy cycle approach to policy.

Dale (1991) argues that Ball's policy cycle approach was selectively confined to criticising the 'sensitising concept' of the New Right agenda of policy legislation. What this means is that Ball has only concentrated on the 'ideology' of policy and neglected the political and economic dimensions of policy initiatives. For Dale (1991), the major weakness in the policy cycle approach is that Ball gives priority to 'agency', rather than the structural dimension of policy.

White and Crump (1993, p. 418) maintain that, whilst Ball has made invaluable contributions to policy analyses, he has been overtly influenced by the writings of Foucault. This influence has 'diverted Ball's attention from possibilities to impossibilities'. They also maintain that Ball, in rejecting the approaches of other organisation theorists, has become 'a critic without always providing enough background material on the theories being criticised' (White & Crump, 1993, p. 419).

Lingard (1993) is also concerned that the strong conception of the state, evident in Ball's 1990 policy sociology, has been replaced in the 1992 study by a more overt and complete poststructuralist solution. For Lingard (1993), there are extra-discursive and structural aspects contributing to the effects of policy. Thus, a reconfigured state remains important both in theoretical and political terms.

Henry (1993) bases one of her criticisms of Ball's policy cycle approach on the grounds that one cannot divorce text from discourse, as Ball suggests. She maintains that 'text and discourse clearly operate in relation rather than in opposition to each other and need to be theorised as such' (Henry, 1993, p. 102). Further, in describing Ball's stance as a 'postmodern flight from "totalising" structural analyses' (p. 101), Henry argues here that Ball's 'Foucauldian' approach to policy does not address the issues of 'the effects of policy . . . dominant discourses and subjected knowledges . . . the relations between patterns of power and policy production' (1993, p. 103). She also maintains that Ball's discussions clearly reflect the absence of engagement with neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives 'to theorise the complex interweavings of ethnicity/race, class and gender in relation to education policy making' (Henry, 1993, pp. 103–104). Another point of contention that Henry raises is the role of the state and education. She informs us that Ball's approach to policy has devoted insignificant attention to this issue. What Ball should adopt, according to Henry (1993, p. 104), is 'a more robust conceptualisation of the role of the contemporary state and its relationship to education policy'.

Evans, Davies and Penny (1994, p. 57) saw the 'merits of the concepts of policy as text, policy as discourse and policy effects as a means of gaining a better purchase on the nuances and complexities that characterise the policy process'. However, whilst Evans, Davies and Penny (1994, p. 58) acknowledge this, they question whether a Foucauldian analysis of policy 'can provide a sufficient framework for understanding the complexities of policy, especially in which both government (the state) and the "subject" are implicated in the construction of policy processes'. They maintain that a Foucauldian analysis of policy is not always beneficial because the state and the 'subject' are absent in the type of conceptual framework that Ball advocates.

Fitz and Halpin (1994, p. 59) were supportive of Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) because the latter sought to separate 'formulation' from the 'implementation' of policy thereby

replacing it with a 'conception of policy generated and implemented "within and around the (educational) system"'. This was important for Fitz and Halpin (1994), because this new conceptualisation helped to advance policies and their outcomes by allowing practitioners to interpret these policies at the micro level. However, a major criticism with this approach is that it 'bears the characteristics of "bottom-up" approaches' (Fitz & Halpin, 1994, p. 60). Thus, this approach is subject to limitations, such as giving the periphery the latitude to frustrate the centre's objectives and there being insufficient attention paid to the analysis of structural constraints.

Hatcher and Troyna (1994) have offered very strong criticisms of Ball's work. Before commenting on these criticisms, I would like to state that Troyna (1994, p. 71) did acknowledge that Ball's work 'offers new ways of seeing the policy making process and challenges some of the conventional wisdoms associated with the formation and diffusion of policy'. However, Hatcher and Troyna (1994, p. 161) maintained that Ball relied too closely on the works of Foucault. This, they argued, has led to the 'striking inconsistencies and contradictions in Ball's works'. For example, they argued that Foucault's refusal to accept the state as a site of power only served to 'undermine the explanatory status of the state in Ball's analysis' and Ball's use of 'discourse to theorise the policy process' is inconsistent with the role that the state is playing in modern society (Hatcher & Troyna, 1994, pp. 161–162). They also argued that Ball did not resolve the theoretical gap 'between a Marxist and pluralist perspective' that he claims to have done but had 'adopted a pluralist framework, albeit "critical"' (p. 162). Furthermore, Hatcher and Troyna (1994, p. 167) maintained that resistance to policy, in Foucault's terms, was 'as fragmentary and decentralised as the power-relations it contests'. They argued that to effectively resist government policy, there should be more collective and active resistance determined by a micro political focus.

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

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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).

To conclude, it is envisaged that the discussions on the change in emphasis from a macro analysis of policy to a micro analysis would serve to entice teachers to scrutinise policies at their schools at the micro level. The discussion on two approaches of analysing policy: a 'state-controlled' approach and a 'policy cycle' approach will also benefit teachers. These approaches, I argue, are useful 'tools' to analyse educational policies.

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