
ESRC Research Project on *Education and Youth Transitions in England, Wales and Scotland, 1984-2002*

MODELS OF POLICY-MAKING AND POLICY LEARNING

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Paper for Seminar on *Policy Learning in 14-19 Education*. Joint seminar of *Education and Youth Transitions Project* and *Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education*, 15 March 2005

INTRODUCTION

This paper grows out of ongoing work in the Education and Youth Transitions project¹ It focuses on how we *conceptualise* policy as a contribution to the process of exploring the extent of convergence or divergence within UK education policy-making, and in considering the potential for policy learning across the UK. In writing the original research proposal, we said that:

'A particular priority will be to use the opportunity presented by this research design to explore the nature of the impact of macro-level change on policy in education and on educational outcomes, and to test contrasting theoretical approaches to these changes. The 'home international' comparisons possible in this study will enable exploration of the capacity of 'local' systems to mediate global pressures, and thus provides a fruitful testing ground for the concepts of 'travelling' and 'embedded' policy.'

The project proposal suggests that since the 1980s, 1990s and into the present day there have been changes in young people's experiences of schooling, their outcomes, levels of participation in the labour market, and in further and higher education. We further suggest that these changes reflect the transition from 'economic nationalism' to the 'new consensus' on education's centrality in post-industrial societies (Brown, Halsey, Lauder and Wells 1997) and consequent policy convergence that tightens the bond between education and the economy. That transition has been experienced throughout GB and mediated by the UK government. At the same time, however, it is necessary to take account of the fact that England, Wales and Scotland have different, though interdependent, education systems for which there has been progressive devolution of responsibility during the last two decades (Raffe *et al* 1999).

Thus the overall context of the project is shaped by the economic, cultural and social transformation of post-industrial society (Brown *et al* 1997). In the period since 1984, which

¹ ESRC R00239852 Principal Investigator: Dr Linda Croxford, Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh (www.ces.ed.ac.uk/)

is the focus of the research, changes in societal context include changes in the global economy and related changes in the structure of the labour market, that in turn have influenced family structures and gender identities (Arnot *et al* 1999). These changes seem to be connected to considerable global education policy convergence (Whitty *et al* 1998) as policy agendas are developed in pursuit of modernisation and to meet the challenges of globalisation. I would argue that recent UK governments have defined these agendas in relation to competitiveness and the discourse of the market (Flynn 2000, Newman 2000), but that they may be received and inflected rather differently in England, Scotland and Wales (Ozga and Lawn 1999b). Thus, as Castells (1998) suggests, the logic of global economic change may be questioned or modified by forces that call upon and reconstitute ethnic, national and local identities. Jones and Alexiadou's (2001) discussion of '*travelling*' and '*embedded*' policy takes travelling policy to refer to supra and trans-national agency activity, as well as to common agendas (for example for the reshaping of educational purposes to develop human capital for the information age). Embedded policy is to be found in 'local' spaces, (which may be national, regional or local) where global policy agendas come up against existing priorities and practices.

This perspective allows for recognition that, while policy choices may be narrowing, national and local assumptions and practices remain significant and mediate or translate global policy in distinctive ways. Within the framework of policy sociology, there is an emergent strand of theorising and investigation that seeks to respond to the problem of interpreting the translation of globalisation into policy. Such work includes Taylor *et al* (1997) who discuss global policy transfer; Ball's characterisation of a 'small' world with 'big' policies (1998), and Lewin's argument that globalisation has produced 'an epidemic' of education policy (1998). There is current work in education that is attentive to the processes of policy in this new context, in particular to detecting and conceptualising their operations at national, transnational and institutional level (Dale 1998).

One of the central underlying problems that interests me in exploring change and convergence/divergence in UK education policy and its impact on youth transitions, is how to understand the interaction of global agenda-setting as a driver of UK policy, with 'local' policy development or mediation. It is within that larger puzzle that I locate the discussion of models of policy-making and approaches to understanding education policy that form the remainder of the paper. My purpose is to consider and discuss how we understand policy, because there is a very considerable divergence in approaches to the theorisation and conceptualisation of policy and policy-making, and it may be helpful to engage-albeit rather rapidly-with these, as part of our attempt to make sense of the global-local interaction of forces shaping and responding to policy within the UK. The discussion that follows reflects my long-standing preoccupation (Ozga 1987, 1995, 2000) with advocating approaches to understanding education policy that are shaped by the following precepts that:

- (1) change in education and education policy should be located within a broad framework of enquiry, that takes account of exogenous, macro-social change;
- (2) resources for understanding education policy should be drawn from across the social sciences;
- (3) research on education policy requires a degree of reflexivity in order to identify more explicitly the assumptions implicit in approaches to and models of policy-making.

Point (1) is already present in this discussion: the project is located in a framework that recognises exogenous change and its effects in promoting homogenous ‘travelling’ policy while simultaneously activating divergent ‘embedded’ policy. In relation to point (2), models of policy-making available in the wider social sciences have been challenged quite profoundly by globalising policy developments, and there are significant developments in conceptualising policy and politics, governance and governmentality. However the take up of these ideas in research and theorising in education policy is limited. Point (3) raises issues that I cannot address comprehensively here: however it is important to note that approaches to policy-making are socially and culturally located (Popkewitz 1984), and draw on different- and sometimes opposed-social theories. Such major theoretical approaches (which may not be explicit) range from structural functionalism and the idea of a social system, to (contrasting) ideas of social structure, to theory focused on agency and constructivism, and also include highly influential theories that identify actors as rational, utility-maximising beings (Waters 1994).

The translation of such theories into approaches to understanding or conceptualising policy may be illustrated in policy analysis/policy science approaches that emphasize roles and social institutions, hierarchies and system adjustment through technical approaches (often shaped by variants of systems theory), and the separation of policy into stages (trajectories or cycles). Policy analysis seeks to identify the best course of action to implement and manage particular decisions: there is an assumption of broad agreement about goals and that management represents instrumental rationality that is functionally necessary, while politics is irrational and dysfunctional. In contrast I would identify a critical policy sociology approach that seeks to explain and understand policy in terms of the distribution of power in society: that problematises policy production and seeks change in the social actions that it analyses. Critical policy sociology does not accept the demarcation of policy from other socio-political activities and actors and thus recognises the politics of the policy process. That perspective also recognises that all organisations have politics that have considerable consequences for policy production. These are examples only-they do not embrace the full range of approaches to policy-and they are selected to illustrate the importance of identifying the different theoretical origins and resources from which different commentators are selecting their preferred conceptualisation of policy (whether or not they acknowledge these framing ideas, and whether or not they are aware of them).

I will now offer a brief account of some of the main models of policy-making that are available in the political science literature, noting changes in these models as they respond to wider contextual shifts.

SOME MODELS OF POLICY-MAKING

System approaches

These approaches tend to stress particular characteristics of policy: for example policy is defined as the purposive action of government, and it is characterised by organised action that has three main elements: coherence, hierarchy and instrumentality (Colebatch 1998). *Coherence* according to Colebatch is the assumption that the elements of the action fit together and form an organised whole (or a single system-of education for example) Policy then becomes what is done in order to steer this system and maintain its coherence: however

in practice coherence is a major policy problem. *Hierarchy*: is the assumption that policy comes from the top and is the authoritative determination of what will be done: policy is made by 'government' and communicated down the line. *Instrumentality*: captures the view that policy is made up of 'policy objectives': these objectives are determined by the identification and attempted solution of particular problems. So policy is understood as problem solving. Policy, in this definition, following Colebatch, has certain attributes: namely *authority*, *expertise* and *order*. Authority means that if something is described as policy then it has the endorsement of an authorized decision-maker: the authority legitimises the policy and enables it to flow down through the hierarchy. Expertise means that policy as problem solving draws on the resources of the organisation (government/school etc) to address concerns and also to evaluate policy solutions (for example through evidence-based approaches). Order implies that policy is systematic and consistent activity. It is acknowledged that not all three attributes are present to the same degree and also that they may be in some conflict or tension with one another.

Policy Purposes and Implementation

Another way of categorising approaches is to look at the ways in which they conceptualise the purposes of policy. There is often a very strong element of goal orientation and the assumption that activity is devoted towards achieving ends. Government in this reading is single-minded, coherent, instrumental and rational. The policy process is accordingly understood as staged or sequential as follows:

1. determining goals
2. choosing a course of action
3. implementing preferred courses of action
4. evaluating results (for efficiency and effectiveness)
5. modifying policy

It has been noted that this view of the policy process is not much evidenced in reality: 'Explanations of policy as the careful progress towards a known goal validate action better than they explain it' (March and Olsen 1989: 25). The rational instrumentalist model also produces a model of policy-making as a loop, or *policy cycle* that moves from decision ... to implementation ... to evaluation ... and back to the decision. There is then a focus on 'problems of implementation' or 'non-compliance', and identification of the following requirements for successful implementation:

1. clear objectives: understanding of what can be achieved by the policy, authoritative commitments backed by research and evaluation
2. specific targets: clear indicators of performance, evidence-based
3. orientation to outcomes, rewarding participants based on outcomes, quasi-contractual relationships
4. regular review

March and Olsen's point about validation applies here too.

Modified System Approaches

The purposive, hierarchical and rational model of policy was very dominant in literature across public policy arenas until the late 1980s, when somewhat looser versions that paid closer attention to context emerged. These located policy-making in a space between possibilities and constraints: choices were understood as being open to policy-makers but the scope for choice is acknowledged to be limited by previous choices and their consequences. This revised systems model accepts tension as part of the process: structure and choice are inextricably linked. As a consequence there is a great deal of ambiguity. In putting forward this revised systems model and explaining the need to engage with motivation and behaviour (and not assume rationality) Jenkins (1997) notes that he anticipates 'much of the usual abuse directed at models of this type', and identifies some problems associated with starting from a systems perspective—namely the focus on goals, adherence to the assumptions of welfare economics, and the pluralistic model of politics. These problems were thrown into relief by the impact of changing politics in the late 1980s and 1990s, in particular the apparent displacement of state-centric models of policy-making. More recent models of policy incorporate some elements of the systems approach while attempting to take account of change: this is most evident in the growth of attention to Policy Networks.

Policy networks

Policy networks contain some elements of the systemic approach to policy while accommodating the relational components of agency, power and interests. Policy network approaches are better able to recognise and explain change, in that members of networks are not understood to have fixed or structurally 'given' interests. Instead there is a focus on contingent and processual outcomes of social relations between different actors. Policy networks are also able to accommodate the blurring of state/civil society boundaries that is such a feature of current policy-making, perhaps especially in England with the growth of cooperation or dispersed responsibilities among state and non-state agencies, private and voluntary sector actors in the delivery of services. Networks are taken to be relatively stable, non-hierarchical and interdependent; linking actors who share resources in order to pursue shared interests and who agree that co-operation is the best way to achieve their goals. The policy network is a meso-level concept of interest group intermediation that is adopted by authors with different views of the distribution of power (Rhodes and Marsh 1992). Rhodes distinguishes between highly integrated networks (policy communities) at one end of his 5 point scale, and loosely integrated issue networks at the other, with professional and producer networks in between (Rhodes 1988), 1995). The policy network approach, as a meso-level concept, is also responsive to ideas about multi-level governance and the interaction of transnational, national and subnational governance, characterised by interlocking and overlapping spheres of governance rather than tiers of government. Policy networks also connect to ideas of changing governance, as governments become dependent on co-operation and the mobilisation of shared resources: instead of emanating from a central authority, policy is in fact *made* in a process involving a plurality of both private and public

organisations. It is argued that networks may be based on trust and co-operation and the sharing of knowledge and experience and thus help to reduce insecurity and overload and may counterbalance inequitable distributions of power. The network is, to a degree, a solution to the pressures and risks of the new policy context. Some discussions of networks draw attention to their capacity to develop learning. It should be noted that there are criticisms of these characterisations of policy networks on the grounds that they draw hitherto unregulated constituencies into the web of governance; they ignore imbalances of power and their effects on interactions; and they promote self-regulation as a form of governmentality (Ozga 2001).

Critical Policy Sociology

This approach foregrounds the inherent tension in education and education policy: education is understood as a means of improving life chances and enriching life, as well as a process that maintains inequality and sustains conservative social formations. The possibilities for progressive development lie in particular in the ways that education produces what Connell calls 'the capacity for social practice'. The potential for such development is always there, but it has to be secured through social action. There is thus a particular orientation to understanding policy-making, that argues that most academic approaches to policy-making seem to accept its profoundly undemocratic (and gendered) nature. For example Yeatman (1994) argues that policy should be conceived as *process* and thus it follows that the work of policy-makers has to be conceived democratically. This opens policy up to the appropriate participation of all those involved all the way through points of conception, operational formulation, implementation, delivery on the ground, consumption and evaluation, and challenges inherent and implicit assumptions about hierarchy, authority and order that are embedded in systems approaches. Some proponents of network theory suggest that networks can incorporate such processes, and develop relationships of trust and reciprocity that challenge hierarchies of authority and power. However, as noted above, these developments may also be seen as legitimating strategies that diffuse responsibility.

SUMMARY

My purpose in reviewing these approaches is not to evaluate them but to set out their main characteristics and thus provide a resource that may help in identifying the assumptions about policy-making that are in play in research and theorising in the field of education, including in the Nuffield review and the Education and Youth Transitions project. These are very selective condensations of complex approaches, containing many different elements that are excluded here. However the point is not to provide a comprehensive statement, but to promote the necessity of engagement with policy as a contested concept.

POLICY LEARNING

The seminar for which this paper was prepared had a focus on policy learning, and sought to identify ways in which inter-UK comparative research on education could contribute to policy learning. However there is a problem of positioning of the researcher in relation to policy learning, just as there is in relation to policy. As researchers, we seek to understand the factors that contribute to effective policy learning, but our assessment of what constitutes

appropriate or effective learning will be linked to the ways in which we understand policy. Most policy learning approaches are highly rational and link directly to system approaches to policy. They assume a mechanistic process of borrowing or transfer of some programme or process from A to B (see, for example Bennett 1991). This approach is exemplified and strengthened by references to ‘evidence-based policy-making’ and current assumptions about the use of cross-national data-gathering as a means of learning from comparing. Indeed the concept of policy learning-like that of evidence-based policy-making-requires interrogation. Critical perspectives on current developments in comparative education (see, for example Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003) point to the use of comparisons, benchmarks and indicators as legitimating policy. However some policy learning approaches are attentive to the social dimension of learning and take seriously the conceptualisation of policy as *process* that policy networks highlight. Weick (1995) has drawn attention to the collective puzzling or sense-making that produces policy, and dialogical conceptualisations of learning stress the significance of learning through communication and exchange-in social practices.

CONCLUDING POINTS

- models of policy-making do not in themselves provide answers to questions about convergence, divergence and devolution in the context of globalisation;
- investigating ‘travelling’ and ‘embedded’ policies and their interrelationships requires clarification of how we understand ‘policy’ and this further requires interrogation of models to explore their framing assumptions;
- policy networks are the current fashionable conceptual tool for understanding policy: they offer a focus on process, but do they underplay power?

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