

Explaining policies: towards a model of school policy-making

Annette Braun¹, Stephen Ball¹, Meg Maguire²

¹*Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom*, ²*King's College London, London, United Kingdom*

Background

This paper will attempt to outline a model which identifies and relates together a variety of factors which begin to explain differences in policy enactments between schools. In this way, it explores a means by which to draw together the four main issues that lie at the centre of the 'Policy enactments in secondary school' research project. These are; the localised nature of policy actions, the presence of many overlapping policies in schools and the role of policy actors and resource limitations (see symposium outline).

Research Questions

Policies are enacted in material conditions, with varying resources, in relation to particular 'problems'. They are set against/alongside existing commitments, values and forms of experience. In other words, the model will need to consider a set of objective conditions for policy in relation to a set of subjective 'interpretational' dynamics, as a framework of making sense of policy at the institutional level. Some aspects of variation in these terms are already built into policy processes in terms of 'earned autonomy' - where some schools are more able than others to exert their own interpretational powers - and it is clear also that the 'market' and performance positioning of schools gives rise to greater or lesser degrees of freedom in relation to particular policies. But as yet, there has been no systematic attempt to develop a framework which might explain how and why the same policies are done differently by different but similar schools.

Methods

As mentioned in the abstract for the first paper in the symposium ('Policy verbs'), the research project is collecting a range of different data related to the schools and their policy contexts. Thus there is a set of recorded and transcribed interviews, together with a wide range of documentary and observational data to draw on. The paper will specifically use the interviews with teachers (from senior leadership team to NQTs, and with other adults, such as Learning Support Assistants, Behaviour Support Workers and bursars/business managers) to identify those factors which enable or inhibit policy responses. Variations between departments will also be taken into account in terms of differences in 'capacity' and 'capability', and positioning in relation to policy imperatives (e.g. English and Maths), and in terms of strongly held principles - and indeed the interaction between these.

Frame

The model will take account of contextual factors (such as school histories, intakes and settings*), material factors (for example, staffing, budget, buildings and infrastructure) and professional factors (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, and 'policy management'). There are also variations in the degree and quality of support offered by Local Authorities. These school-based factors will be set over/against pressures and expectations arising from the broader policy context (such as Ofsted ratings and Inspection Reports, school examination performance and league tables, and legal requirements and responsibilities). Theoretically and analytically, the model draws on all aspects of the project's work, which includes coding for content and critical discourses, as well as theorisations of enactment and translation (see 'policy verb' paper).

* We recognise that contextual factors can have 'real' effects, as well as being deployed within schools to 'construct' sets of limitations or impossibilities in relation to policy - for example, when intake factors are used to 'explain' poor levels of performance.

Research findings

The outcome of this systematic attempt to process our research data will be an emergent framework or model that seeks to explain how and why policies are done differently by different schools.