

ANALYSING THE POLICY PROCESS

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SYNOPSIS

This paper starts by charting the recent development of policy analysis as a research field within Scottish education. It is suggested that the impact of New Right policies combined with the contributions of academic commentators have stimulated the emergence of a critical perspective on the policy process. Thereafter, some of the approaches open to policy researchers are examined: a contrast between 'inside' and 'outside' methods is offered, though it is emphasised that these should not be regarded as mutually exclusive alternatives. The value of theoretical models as a way of making sense of source material is also considered and particular attention is focused on the insights which discourse analysis can provide. Some of the ideas of Foucault and Lyotard are used to illustrate the potential of discourse analysis and several examples of its application to educational policies in Scotland are given. Finally, it is argued that researchers need to be resistant to pressures from policy makers if they are to fulfil their public responsibilities satisfactorily.

CONTEXT

Policy analysis, as a specific research field within educational studies, is a relatively recent development in Scottish education. Educational policies have, of course, always been subject to debate and discussion but, prior to the mid-1980s, such debate was conducted within circumscribed limits. The focus was on policy recommendations and their practical feasibility rather than on the processes by which policies were arrived at or the people who promoted them. There was, in effect, a lack of a critical perspective in the way in which policy issues were addressed.

There are several possible explanations for this state of affairs. One account would suggest that there was a widely held consensus about the aims and values of Scottish education, so that there was a framework of assumptions about the nature of the enterprise that did not need to be questioned in any depth or detail. A related explanation would claim that there was a general confidence in the stewardship of the great and the good in Scottish education, a belief that they were genuinely trying to do their best and could be trusted. An alternative reading would argue that the lack of a critical perspective arose from the fact that there was not a sufficiently large constituency of informed opinion within the system with knowledge of how the policy process worked: the policy community (as it has come to be called) was relatively small and access to its mode of operations was restricted (despite a degree of 'opening up' in the 1960s and 1970s).

In the mid-1980s the situation began to change. Partly the change derived from the challenge to the educational establishment represented by the New Right and Thatcherism. The perceived complacency of the policy community came under attack and the liberal consensus was blamed for a range of educational ills. New Right reforms both in Scotland and England were pushed through in ways which ran counter to existing practices and so attention came to be directed at the policy process itself, not just the substantive reforms that were being implemented. In Scotland the key figure in this development was Michael Forsyth (Humes, 1995a).

The raising of consciousness about the policy process was aided by the publication of books and articles taking a much more critical line than had been the norm before. My own book *The Leadership Class in Scottish Education* (Humes, 1986) was published in 1986. Andrew McPherson and Charles Raab's excellent study *Governing*

Education (McPherson & Raab, 1988) appeared in 1988. In the useful series on *Professional Issues in Education* published by Scottish Academic Press there were important contributions, particularly on curriculum development, by Bill Gatherer (1989) and Angela Roger and David Hartley (1990). Other significant work in this critical vein came from Ruth Jonathan (1990), David Carr (1993), Ian Stronach (1992), and John Fairley and Lindsay Paterson (1995). The net result was that the constituency of informed opinion increased. There is now a better understanding of the management of educational policy than hitherto, especially in relation to the way in which power is exercised (through patronage, for example). It would be wrong, however, to claim that understanding is complete. There remain large areas of Scottish education about which there is insufficient knowledge. Examples would include the lack of full-length studies dealing with either the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) or the work of Directors of Education. Moreover, as certain strategies become well known — and thus run the risk of outliving their political usefulness — so new ones are employed in order to enhance legitimacy and retain control (Humes, 1995b). Vigilance is required in order to follow these transitions in policy management.

It is against this background that I want to look at methods of analysing the policy process. Various investigative strategies are open to researchers. What are they and what are their strengths and limitations? What obstacles are researchers likely to encounter as they enquire into the origins, development and implementation of educational policies? Is critical understanding enough or is there a further stage of analysis? These are the questions that will be addressed in the sections that follow.

‘INSIDE’ AND ‘OUTSIDE’ APPROACHES

I shall begin by contrasting ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ approaches to policy analysis. It should be emphasised that the initial characterisation will be a rather crude, black-and-white contrast and that neither approach is normally found in a ‘pure’ form. They are best regarded as opposite ends of a continuum with most researchers occupying somewhere between the two.

‘Inside’ approaches to policy analysis work from the assumption that, in order to make sense of the policy process, it is necessary to rely heavily on the insights of those who have been intimately involved in policy planning and development: senior SOEID officials, HMIs, Directors of Education, key figures in the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC), the Scottish Examination Board (SEB), the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC), etc. Only those who have been actively engaged in the process, it is argued, can fully explain the considerations that led to the adoption of one policy option and the rejection of another. Likewise, shifts of emphasis, changes of direction and re-definitions of aims require evidence from the principal actors if they are to be properly understood. The ‘inside’ perspective, on this approach, is indispensable. To neglect it is to run the risk of missing important clues or misinterpreting events.

On the face of it, all this seems eminently sensible. However, there are difficulties. The ‘inside’ approach points to the interview as the most suitable method for gathering evidence. But many of the people referred to above are constrained by contracts of employment or the Official Secrets Act from disclosing the sort of information that the researcher would seek. McPherson and Raab’s book *Governing Education* relied heavily on extensive interviewing with 27 subjects in a lengthy process that involved negotiating an agreed text. They managed to achieve this because most of their subjects had retired and so were less constrained than people still in post. The result was a great deal of fascinating information that probably could not have been gathered in any other way. It is not unfair to say, however, that their coverage of the earlier part of the period which they review (from 1945 to 1975) is stronger

than their coverage of the more recent past — and this is directly attributable to their limited access to key players in the period after 1975.

It is not entirely impossible to secure an interview with current members of the policy community and, indeed, several of my own students have benefited from such access. The securing of an interview, however, does not guarantee that much useful evidence will be forthcoming. I remember one of my Ph.D. students who, after some two years of negotiation, was granted an interview with a senior SOEID official. The topic of his study was not an especially sensitive one at the time of the interview — it related to events in the 1960s — but some of the information he was seeking was still covered by the 30 years' rule, and some of those involved in the development and implementation of the policy which was being investigated were still alive, and so potentially subject to 'embarrassment', that catch-all reason for non-disclosure which all governments invoke — ostensibly in the public interest but in fact out of self-interest. In deference to these considerations, the student submitted 18 questions in advance so there was no sense in which the official was going to be 'ambushed'. However, after the initial pleasantries were dispensed with, the student was informed that the official could not answer the first 14 questions. The student had the temerity to ask: 'Do you mean that you are unable to answer the first 14 questions or that you are not allowed to answer the first 14 questions?' In response, the official simply repeated that no answers to the first 14 questions could be provided. Not surprisingly, the replies to the remaining 4 questions were singularly unilluminating — so much so that the student, a man of otherwise unfailing courtesy, adamantly refused to include the official in his acknowledgements.

It may be wondered why the official bothered to give the interview at all. The answer is simple. A straight refusal would have seemed obstructive. By eventually granting the interview (albeit after a lengthy delay from the time of the first request), the department could be presented as co-operative — indeed generous, in seeming to relax the 30 years' rule about classified material. The whole episode was, of course, a massive waste of the student's time but it did provide an interesting insight into the techniques of bureaucratic evasion. What is significant in terms of the general argument that is being advanced here is that the 'inside' approach has limitations and may not yield the information that the researcher is seeking.

What about the 'outside' approach? It starts from a different set of assumptions. If the researcher is to retain a critical perspective, he or she must avoid being drawn into the 'assumptive worlds' (McPherson & Raab, 1988) of the subjects. This calls for a high measure of scepticism about official accounts of the policy process. The 'outside' view assumes that the principal actors are inclined to give a distorted picture of what happens. They will conceal important evidence and will be inclined to reveal only what is likely to reflect well on their own contribution. Furthermore, despite being on the 'inside', their understanding of the institutions through which policies are channelled may well be defective. They will have been subject to a socialisation process involving acceptance of conventions and respect for hierarchies. In other words, they will be too close to the action to evaluate the context: they will fail to question the 'proper' procedures which, by other standards, may be judged highly improper. The researcher thus has to remain detached and resistant to the taken-for-granted values of the policy community.

One consequence of this is that the 'outside' researcher has to rely heavily on documentary sources, both formal (official reports, minutes) and informal (newsletters, occasional papers). These have their limitations but because they are written for a range of audiences — not just members of the policy community — it is possible to glean a considerable amount of useful information from them. There is, I think, a tendency to undervalue informal documentary sources. Certainly in my own research I have found these to be extremely useful in helping me to see

connections between people and between institutions. Such sources enable the researcher to build up a picture of policy networks. Seemingly ephemeral items in papers emanating from a variety of bodies — SCCC, SEB, SCRE, SEB, SCET, GTC, etc. — combine to provide insights into the way in which policy making is managed and controlled. The policy community in Scottish education is relatively small and many of the central figures know each other on a personal basis. ‘Networking’ has recently become a fashionable concept but, in the Scottish context, it has been around for a long time.

However, the ‘outside’ researcher needs to be alert to the danger of jumping to conspiracy theories on the basis of inadequate evidence. Such theories presuppose a higher degree of efficiency on the part of the SOEID than past experience would suggest is justified. The real challenge is to find a way of making sense of the vast array of documentation that is available for inspection. This leads directly to a consideration of analytic techniques.

THE INTERPRETATION OF SOURCES

Whether researchers adopt an ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ perspective they need some kind of conceptual framework, however provisional, in order to make sense of their material. The lack of such a framework will lead to an ‘undigested’, anecdotal treatment of data. At this point the value of models of the policy process becomes apparent. These can range from simple sequential models (conception, consultation, development, implementation, evaluation) to more complex interactive models, such as the one I have described in earlier papers (Humes, 1993, 1994). The latter involves five dimensions (ideology, people, institutions, issues and culture), the relative importance of which has varied over time. Kirk (1995) has made some use of this model in his analysis of policy-making in teacher education.

Exploration of theoretical models can lead the researcher into territory that, initially at least, may not seem especially ‘educational’ in character. This, however, may not be a bad thing. Raab (1994) has commented on ‘a lamentable subject-centrism [which] has kept education research specialists from direct contact with the developments of theory and method that have taken place within the general policy studies field, or for that matter within other applied fields such as housing, health or social security’. He goes on to suggest that it would be desirable if a common academic discourse emerged, in which ‘education policy sociology shares premises and methods with policy studies within political science and its cognate disciplines’. The advantage of such an approach would be that developments in education would be located — and understood — in relation to broad political movements, thus avoiding the ‘disciplinary parochialism’ which Dale has deplored (cited in Raab, 1994).

Viewing education in this way would encourage reflection on how curricular and institutional reforms are shaped by ideological and economic forces which impact widely on public policy. As part of this, the shifting relationship between the state, schooling, the economy and other public services would invite scrutiny. The researcher would thus be encouraged to think about a series of big political questions of a kind that policy makers themselves often prefer not to answer. Asking the right questions is vital if the interrogation of the policy process is to lead to enlightenment. For me, some of the key questions are these:

What are the origins (ideological, political, economic, cultural) of new policies?

Who has the most say in their formulation — politicians, bureaucrats, professionals?

Which agencies (government departments, non-governmental public bodies, local authorities) are charged with developing and implementing them?

Where does responsibility lie for their success or failure — with policy makers, managers, teachers?

This kind of critical questioning often leads to scepticism about official accounts of the policy process, accounts which invoke principles such as partnership, consultation and consensus as if they were unproblematic. Such scepticism is reinforced if the techniques of discourse analysis, associated principally with Michel Foucault (1970; 1972; 1981a), are brought to bear on educational policy. Discourse analysis is essentially concerned with the inter-relation between knowledge, rhetoric and power (Macdonell, 1986; Fairclough, 1989). It proceeds by examining educational 'texts' — whether interview transcripts, official policy documents, ministerial statements, or other material deriving from individuals, groups or institutions seeking to explain, justify or influence the policy process — and subjecting them to careful scrutiny, not just in terms of their surface meaning but also in terms of their underlying messages. It is, in other words, an exercise in decoding so that the full significance of the relationship between speaker or writer and audience(s) is appreciated: this involves, among other things, attending to recurring concepts and metaphors as well as sensitivity to tone and style.

For Foucault a key issue is accounting for 'the positions and viewpoints' from which people express ideas and 'the institutions which prompt people to speak... and which store and distribute the things that are said' (Foucault, 1981b). This raises questions about the legitimacy with which utterances are made or, as Ball (1994a) puts it: 'Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority'. Thus 'regimes of truth' are established which gain currency as representations of social and political reality and which serve to marginalise other representations. This process usually involves ideological struggle. For example, in analysing publications produced by New Right 'think tanks' such as the Adam Smith Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies, Ball (1990) shows how they used a sustained 'discourse of derision' directed against the liberal consensus of the 1960s and 1970s. This was an essential preliminary to the replacement of progressive orthodoxies in education with consumerist policies emphasising choice, standards and competition.

Ball has acknowledged his indebtedness to Foucault in methodological as well as substantive respects (Ball, 1994b). In interpreting interview material, for example, Ball seeks to uncover the 'infrastructure of power/knowledge' by adopting three approaches. The first deals with 'accounts of what happened, who said what, whose voices were important': this is the 'how?' of policy. The second approach is concerned with 'the "types of knowledge" which provide justification and explanation for certain policy solutions and exclude others': this is the 'why?' of policy. And the third approach explores the political, economic and institutional pressures which serve as 'structural and relational constraints and influences... upon policy making': this is the 'because' of policy. Ball's technique need not be confined to interview material: the same multi-level analysis could be applied to other 'texts'. The important point is that 'The same data can be subjected to very different types and levels of interpretation... no one interpretational mode or set of theoretical tools... is adequate or exhaustive of the analytical possibilities of policy analysis' (Ball, 1994b). This observation also implies that the researcher should not feel obliged to become fully committed to one methodological stance or be over-concerned about accusations of theoretical eclecticism.

Another theorist whose work can provide insights into the policy process in education is Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984). His principal concern is with the

production and legitimisation of knowledge. He argues that the modern world has seen an explosion of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, and official accounts of the function of education have presented access to this knowledge as a kind of liberation, both individual and collective. This interpretation is a story of progress, a narrative of emancipation, in which everyone has a 'right' to enlightenment: 'the State resorts to the narrative of freedom every time it assumes direct control over the training of the "people", under the name of the "nation", in order to point them down the path of progress' (Lyotard, 1984). The effect of this, according to Lyotard, is to render illegitimate points of view which question the contribution of modern science to social development or which cast doubt on the extent to which real progress is being made. Thus, for example, some environmental stances are dismissed as obscurantist or expressive of romantic retreat because they dispute the degree to which modern science is beneficial. Similarly, critics who question the validity of vocational pressures on the curriculum — which derive, in part at least, from economic arguments about technical efficiency (another version of 'progress') — are dismissed as out of touch with the 'real' world.

What Lyotard calls 'the principle of performativity' is extended from the social system to the educational system. 'The task of education is to operate in the most efficient ways to provide individuals with the learning they require to optimise their contribution to the social system' (Usher & Edwards, 1994). This means that certain kinds of knowledge are valued much more than others. Recent changes in higher education can be explained in these terms. The emphasis on competence-based qualifications, transferable skills and applied knowledge is entirely compatible with the 'grand narrative' of emancipation through scientific progress linked to economic success.

These comments only scratch the surface of Lyotard's analysis of how 'legitimate' knowledge provides support for particular economic and political ideologies. What is being suggested is not that his ideas should be accepted as a complete explanation of social change — like Foucault, he has attracted critics as well as disciples — but simply that he offers the kind of broad conceptual framework that policy analysis in education needs if it is to move beyond localised accounts of events understood only in their own immediate terms. Lyotard's central concepts of progress, emancipation and performativity provide another explanatory map with which to approach educational 'texts' and uncover the discursive narratives which shape them.

Sensitivity to the nuances of language is a vital element in Lyotard's method. Drawing on Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games', he classifies different types of utterance, depending on the precise relationships that exist between the sender, the receiver and the substance of the statement. The details of his classification need not concern us here. What is important is that different relationships involve the deployment of different language games. For those who occupy leadership roles, knowing the range of options and being able to use them appropriately is an essential part of shaping the perceptions of 'truth' and 'reality' that gain widespread currency.

Discourse analysis may seem to be unduly linguistic in its emphasis but controlling the terms of any policy debate is an important part of exercising real power over decision-making. The point is well made by Peter Cookson:

Decoding the power discourse requires a series of understandings about the nature of language as a verbal expression of social relations. Words do not exist in a disembodied form; they have meaning within a social context that is class bound, conflictual and power driven. Those who control this symbolic world are able to shape and manipulate the marketplace of educational ideas. (Cookson, 1994)

It will be instructive to illustrate these general points about the value of discourse analysis as an interpretative tool by looking at cases specific to Scottish educational policy-making.

DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE DISCOURSES

Educational documents rarely have a single discursive thread running through them: the messages are often mixed, sometimes deliberately so. One example of this can be found in the field of educational management. In the late 1980s numerous publications extolling the virtues of managerial principles began to appear: HMI reports on various aspects of school management (e.g., SED, 1987); Strathclyde Region's *Managing Progress* (SRC, 1987); SED's management training modules for headteachers (SED, 1990). Two discursive threads can be found in these publications. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on consultation, on managers adopting a listening mode, and on the empowerment of staff: this approach is sometimes summed up as 'participative management'. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on the right of managers to manage, the importance of leadership, a decision-taking culture and the need to set clear targets and time-scales. There is a potential for conflict here. It is certainly not unknown for schools to conduct consultation exercises, the results of which are unwelcome to senior management and are simply ignored. What this suggests is that the two discursive threads do not carry equal weight. The dominant discourse is managerial rather than democratic in character. 'Participative management' thus emerges as a rhetorical device designed to disarm and secure consent: in Cookson's terms, it is about manipulating 'the marketplace of educational ideas'.

A second example can be found in the revised *Guidelines* for teacher education which all initial training courses now have to follow (SOED, 1993). Again, two discursive threads are in evidence. The dominant discourse has to do with the specification of teaching skills in terms of competences and is drawn from the world of industrial training. Lyotard's argument about progress and 'performativity' might be used to explain the emergence of this form of discourse. It is a form that has been criticised as promoting a crude reductionist model of teacher education which concentrates too heavily on narrowly defined skills and fails to pay sufficient attention to questions of meaning and purpose (Carr, 1993; Humes, 1995c). Defenders of the *Guidelines*, however, would point out that there is another discursive thread in evidence which might be described as 'professional' in orientation (Kirk, 1994). In the introduction it is stated that 'the term "professional competences" should be taken to refer to knowledge, understanding, critical thinking and positive attitudes, as well as to practical skills'. This sounds promising, even bold, but in fact these qualities hardly feature in the subsequent list of competences, which are essentially task-related rather than analytical or dispositional.

The question then arises, why bother to include such a statement? Again part of the explanation has to do with disarming presentation, an attempt to soften the hard-edged character of the main part of the document. But there is perhaps more to it than that. Here Foucault's comments on 'the positions and viewpoints' from which people speak are relevant. There is a sense in which this text has been 'negotiated' between various players in the policy process — politicians, administrators, HMIs, senior staff in teacher education institutions. Although the *Guidelines* document represents an important shift in the way in which teacher education is carried out in Scotland, it has been a less dramatic shift than that experienced south of the border, where a Teacher Training Agency exercises significant power and school-based training is proceeding apace (Williams, 1995). The abandonment of mentoring in Scotland represents another significant difference (Humes, 1996). What might be surmised is that the case for resisting a narrowly functional view of teacher education, a view which limits trainee teachers to current orthodoxies, must have been put by someone

— and someone, moreover, who had sufficient clout to influence the content of the final document. Within the SOEID the most likely source of such lobbying is the Inspectorate. I am not noted for my kind observations about the Inspectorate but on this occasion there would seem to be some grounds for thinking that they might have helped to prevent the worst features of English teacher education from being imported north of the border.

Recognising the place of negotiation in policy formulation and development highlights the need to give weight to the *process* aspect of policy making. It is not static. It is subject to redirection. Stephen Ball makes the point strongly:

Policies shift and change their meaning in the arenas of politics; representations change, key interpreters (secretaries of state, ministers, chairs of councils) change (sometimes the change in key actors is a deliberate tactic for changing the meaning of policy)... [Policies thus have] an interpretational and representational history. (Ball 1994)

A very clear example of this would be the role assumed by Sir Ron Dearing in relation to the *impasse* which developed over the English National Curriculum.

A less obvious change in terms of personnel — but clear enough in terms of the way in which policy has been represented and interpreted — can be found in Higher Still. There have been a number of important shifts since the original proposals of the Howie report and there is a massive amount of documentation charting this which could be subjected to discourse analysis. One interesting aspect is the progressive side-lining of any serious epistemological debate about the nature and structure of knowledge appropriate to the upper secondary school. What was originally the dominant discourse is now very much subordinate. The programme has become focused on questions of terminology, articulation and differentiation, as well as on the practical problems of timetabling, resourcing and modularisation. There is a sense in which this is inevitable as the policy moves nearer to implementation. But it would be regrettable if pragmatism were to overtake entirely those very important issues of educational principle relating to the academic/vocational divide which Howie analysed so perceptively.

There are other examples which could serve to illustrate the potential of discourse analysis. Some interesting work has already been done on 5–14, analysed in terms of the various ‘narrative strands’ which it embodies (McAllister, 1993). Again, the mismanagement of mentoring has been interpreted in terms of a dislocation between power and responsibility (Humes, 1996). Still awaiting treatment is the field of higher education in Scotland, where the massive documentation produced by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) offers considerable opportunity to the researcher. There is scope here for the application of that part of Lyotard’s analysis which examines international trends in higher education, including his challenging critique of open and distance learning as the latest version of control masquerading as emancipation. It is to be hoped that this and other opportunities to extend the range of work in policy analysis will not be missed.

RESEARCHERS AND POLICY MAKERS

Underlying much of what I have been arguing is a strong belief in the value of a critical dimension to research into educational policy. If the relationship between researchers and policy makers becomes too comfortable — and this is a danger inherent in ‘inside’ approaches — then the quality of research is likely to suffer. There is another source of concern. Reservations are often expressed about the pressures to which researchers are subject through funding and constraints on reporting their findings. The credibility of social research will be fatally damaged if it comes to be

seen as simply an exercise in telling the funding agency (whether government or any other body) what it wants to hear. Research would thus become merely another element in the rhetoric designed to control the agenda and manipulate the terms of the debate.

Sometimes the pressures on researchers to collude with funders in coming up with 'acceptable' findings are disguised as concerns about methodological issues. It might be suggested, for example, that the research technique being used is imperfect and does not justify any firm conclusions, particularly of a critical kind. This kind of tactic is one to which researchers are particularly susceptible because it appeals to their desire to achieve methodological precision. But in social research the ideal of methodological 'purity' is an illusion. Such research is always a complex, messy business in which the 'evidence' is never complete and the relative importance of the factors at work is a matter of judgement and interpretation rather than of establishing the 'facts' with absolute certainty. That does not mean, of course, that researchers should be cavalier about method. They must try to proceed as carefully and systematically as possible. But, equally, they should not be persuaded that their conclusions should be characterised by relentless blandness.

It is for these reasons that I place considerable value on independence, detachment and resistance to the rules of the game. No doubt my preference is partly a temperamental thing but there is a more important justification, relating to public responsibility and the quality of the democratic system. R.S. Downie has argued persuasively that there is a duty on professionals to speak out on matters of public interest, even if it involves going against the socialisation process to which they are subject and the institutions to which they owe some loyalty (Downie, 1990). In the current climate, having too collusive a relationship with policy makers may result in a failure to live up to that duty.

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