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To cite this article: Stephen J. Ball (1993) WHAT IS POLICY? TEXTS, TRAJECTORIES AND TOOLBOXES, Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 13:2, 10-17, DOI: [10.1080/0159630930130203](https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630930130203)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0159630930130203>



Published online: 06 Jul 2006.



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WHAT IS POLICY? TEXTS, TRAJECTORIES AND TOOLBOXES

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Introduction

This paper might be described as an exercise in theoretical heurism. It is intentionally tentative and open-ended. It is also, because of constraints of space, rather schematic at times. I realise that on occasion it resorts to aphorism rather than argument. It rests in part on an oddly unfashionable position in educational and sociological research. That is, that in the analysis of complex social issues — like policy — two theories are probably better than one. Or to put it another way, the complexity and scope of policy analysis — from an interest in the workings of the state to a concern with contexts of practice and the distributional outcomes of policy — preclude the possibility of successful single theory explanations. What we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories. Thus, I want to replace the modernist theoretical project of abstract parsimony with a more post-modernist one of localised complexity. This polarisation and the dilemmas it highlights are very much to the fore in recent debates in the UK about the conception and purposes of 'policy-sociology' (Ozga 1987 and 1990, and Ball 1990). Thus, Ozga (1990) suggests that it is important to "bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro level investigation, especially that which takes account of people's perception and experiences" (p.359). Now that is what I mean by scope and I agree strongly with Ozga's plea. But she goes on to criticise approaches which generate "a view of policy making which stresses *ad hocery*, serendipity, muddle and negotiation" (p.360). Now that is part of what I mean by complexity (or at least one aspect of it) and I disagree strongly with Ozga's plea. We cannot rule out certain forms and conceptions of social action simply because they seem awkward or theoretically challenging or difficult. The challenge is to relate together analytically the *ad hocery* of the macro with the *ad hocery* of the micro without losing sight of the systematic bases and effects of *ad hoc* social actions.

One of the conceptual problems currently lurking within much policy research and policy sociology is that more often than not analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy. The meaning of policy is taken for granted and theoretical and epistemological dry rot is built into the analytical structures they build. It is not difficult to find the term policy being used to describe very different 'things' at different points in the same study. 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. Now let me add quickly that I do not except myself from these criticisms; although in recent work with Richard Bowe we have tried to be careful and explicit about our understanding and use of the term policy (Bowe and Ball with Gold 1992).

Now typically in a paper which begins like this one I would now offer my own definitive version of the meaning of policy and with a few rhetorical flourishes and a bit of fancy theoretical footwork I would solve all the problems that I have pointed up. But I cannot do that. Or at least I cannot do that very simply. The reason is that I hold my own theoretical uncertainties about the meaning of policy and in my recent writing on policy issues I actually inhabit two very different conceptualisations of policy. For the time being I will call these: **policy as text** and **policy as discourse**. In simple terms the differences between these two conceptualisations are rather dramatic and in sociological terms rather hoary and traditional. But the question 'what is policy?',

should not mislead us into unexamined assumptions about policies as ‘things’; policies are also processes and outcomes (more of which later).

Policy as Text

Here, somewhat under the influence of literary theory, we can see policies as representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors’ interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context). A policy is both contested and changing, always in a state of ‘becoming’, of ‘was’ and ‘never was’ and ‘not quite’; “for any text a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings” (Codd 1988 p.239). Now this conception is not simply one which privileges the significance of readings of policy by its subjects. While that is important — authors cannot control the meanings of their texts — policy authors do make concerted efforts to assert such control by the means at their disposal. We need to understand those efforts and their effects on readers. And I am by no means arguing that authorial intentions can be ignored. Giddens (1987 p.106) suggests that: “In ordinary talk, communicative intent can be checked by direct interrogation and by reformation on the part of the original speaker. There seems no reason to deny that we can interrogate a text in parallel manner”. But then policy texts are rarely the work of single authors or a single process of production. Thus, in addition, it is crucial to recognise that the policies themselves, the texts, are (a) not necessarily clear or closed or complete. The texts are the product of compromises at various stages (at points of initial influence, in the micropolitics of legislative formulation, in the parliamentary process and in the politics and micropolitics of interest group articulation). There is *ad hocery*, negotiation and serendipity within the state, within the policy formulation process. Now if this sounds like a restatement of the epistemology of pluralism it is not meant to be. There is a difference between agenda control and ideological politics and the processes of policy influence and text production within the state. The point is that quibbling and dissensus and sometimes the effects of quibbling and dissensus result in a blurring of meanings, in public confusion and a dissemination of doubt. We only have to look at Edwards, Fitz and Whitty’s (1989), and Edwards, Gewirtz and Whitty’s (1992) studies of the Assisted Places Scheme and City Technology Colleges to see that sometimes it is actually difficult to even identify analytically what a policy is and what it is intended to achieve. These studies also point up a second issue. (b) 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 have their own momentum inside the state; purposes and intentions are re-worked and re-oriented over time. The problems faced by the state change over time. Policies are represented differently by different actors and interests — Kenneth Baker’s Grant Maintained Schools scheme as against Margaret Thatcher’s; Margaret Thatcher’s National Curriculum as against John Major’s, Kenneth Baker’s and Kenneth Clarke’s. At all stages in the policy process we are confronted both with different interpretations of policy, and with what Rizvi and Kemmis (1987) call ‘interpretations of interpretations’. And these attempts to represent or re-represent policy sediment and build up over time spread confusion and allow for play in the playing-off of meanings. Gaps and spaces for action and response are opened up as a result. Thus, the physical text that pops through the school letterbox, or where ever, does not arrive ‘out of the blue’, it has an interpretational and representational history. Neither does it enter a social or institutional vacuum. The text and its readers and the context of response all have histories. Policies enter existing patterns of inequality, eg the structure of local

markets, local class relations. They ‘impact’ or are taken up differently as a result (see Ball, Gewirtz and Bowe 1992 on the middle-class use of local education markets). Policy is not exterior to inequalities, although it may change them, it is also affected, inflected and deflected by them.

Some texts are never even read first hand. An ongoing study of the Maths National Curriculum has found that 7% of its sample of Maths teachers have never read any National Curriculum documents (Brown 1992); an ongoing study of assessment at Key Stage 1 finds that a significant number of teachers in the 32 case study schools fundamentally misunderstand the premises and methods of School Attainment Tasks and teacher assessment (Gipps and Brown 1992). Confusion begets confusion. But there may often be key mediators of policy in any setting who are relied upon by others to relate policy to context or to gatekeep; eg headteachers (Wallace 1988) or heads of department (Bowe, Ball and Gold 1992). But also certain policy texts may be collectively undermined or may generate mass confusion and de-moralisation. Pollard (1992 p.112) provides a very good example of both the mediation and de-legitimation of a text — the Schools Examination and Assessment Council *Guide to Teacher Assessment* (1990).

This document, which was intended to provide INSET support to schools, seriously failed to connect with primary teachers’ views about learning or with the practicalities of the circumstances in which they work. For instance, it was suggested that ‘lessons’ are planned with direct reference to Attainment Targets and suggested, unproblematically, that the National Curriculum has set out the order in which children would learn. To teachers and advisers who retained child-centred beliefs and an awareness of the diverse patterns by which children learn, this was like a red rag to a bull.

There was also enormous hilarity and anger over the impracticality of many of the suggestions which were made. In particular, the authors of the materials seemed to have no awareness of the demands of teaching with large class sizes and made a number of simplistic and naive suggestions. The credibility of the document was thus heavily undercut. SEAC was then humiliated by an article on the materials by Ted Wragg in *The Times Educational Supplement* entitled ‘Who puts the “Ass” in Assessment?’ and a large number of schools and LEAs actively discouraged the circulation or use of the *Guide*.

Nonetheless, policies are textual interventions into practice; and although many teachers (and others) are proactive, ‘writerly’ readers of texts, their readings and reactions are not constructed in circumstances of their own making. Policies pose problems to their subjects. Problems that must be solved in context. It may be possible for some to ‘hide’ from policy but that is rarely a common option. I must be very clear, policy “matters: it is important, not the least because it consists of texts which are (sometimes) *acted on*” (Beilharz 1987 p.394). The point is that we cannot predict or assume how they will be acted on, what their immediate effect will be, what room for manoeuvre actors will find for themselves. Action may be constrained differently (even tightly) but it is not determined by policy. Solutions to the problems posed by policy texts will be localised and should be expected to display *ad hocery* and messiness. Responses indeed must be ‘creative’; but I use the term carefully here and in a specific sense. Given constraints, circumstances and practicalities, the translation of the crude, abstract simplicities of policy texts into interactive and sustainable practices of some sort involve productive thought, invention and adaptation. Policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, off-set against other expectations. All of this involves creative social action not robotic reactivity. Thus, the enactment of texts relies on things like commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical

limitations, cooperation and (importantly) intertextual compatibility. Furthermore, sometimes when we focus analytically on one policy or one text we forget that other policies and texts are in circulation and the enactment of one may inhibit or contradict or influence the possibility of the enactment of others. (I could illustrate most of these points with data from our Education Reform Act study; see Bowe and Ball with Gold 1992). And the more ideologically abstract any policy is, the more distant in conception from practice (as in the example above), the less likely it is to be accommodated in unmediated form into the context of practice; it confronts 'other realities', other circumstances, like poverty, disrupted classrooms, lack of materials, multi-lingual classes. Some policies change some of the circumstances in which we work, they cannot change all the circumstances. Riseborough (1992), in a detailed analysis of the policy responses of one primary headteacher, draws our attention to the importance of 'secondary adjustments' in teachers' engagement with policy: "... teachers can create, through a repertoire of individual and collective, 'contained' (i.e. 'fitting in without introducing pressure for radical change') and 'disruptive' (i.e. attempts to radically alter the structure or leave) strategies, an empirically rich underlife to policy intention" (p.37). Generally, we have failed to research, analyse and conceptualise this underlife, the 'secondary adjustments' which relate teachers to policy and to the state in different ways. The crude and over-used term resistance is a poor substitute here which allows for both rampant over-claims and dismissive under-claims to be made about the way policy problems are solved in context.

In all discussion of interpretation and creativity, I am not trying to exclude power. Textual interventions can change things significantly, but I am suggesting that we should not ignore the way that things stay the same nor the ways in which changes are different in different settings and different from the intentions of policy authors (where these are clear). Power, as Foucault points out, is productive: "relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play (1981 p.94). Policies typically posit a restructuring, redistribution and disruption of power relations, so that different people can and cannot do different things; again "relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter ..." (p.94). Power is multiplicitous, overlain, interactive and complex, policy texts **enter** rather than simply change power relations. Hence again the complexity of the relationship between policy intentions, texts, interpretations and reactions. From a rather different theoretical starting point Offe (1984 p.106) offers a similar view:

... the real social effects ('impact') of a law or institutional service are not determined by the wording of laws and statutes ('policy output'), but instead are generated primarily as a consequence of social disputes and conflicts, for which state policy merely establishes the location and timing of the contest, its subject matter and 'the rules of the game'. In these cases of extra-political or 'external' implementation of social policy measures state social policy in no way establishes concrete 'conditions' (for example, the level of services, specific insurance against difficult living conditions). Instead, it defines the substance of conflict and, by differentially empowering or dis-empowering the relevant social groups, biases the extent of the specific 'utility' of the institutions of social policy for these groups.

What Offe is saying I think is that practice and the 'effects' of policy cannot be simply read-off from texts and are the outcome of conflict and struggle between 'interests' in context.

Thus, I take it as axiomatic that there is agency and there is constraint in relation to policy — this is not a sum-zero game. Policy analysis requires not an understanding that is based on constraint **or** agency but on the changing relationships between

constraint **and** agency. Furthermore, such an analysis must achieve insight into both overall and localised outcomes of policy.

But I also want to use this quotation as a transition point in order to move on to the **other** things I want to say about policy. First, I want to take up the point made that state policy ‘establishes the location and timing of the contest, its subject matter and ‘the rules of the game’’. This I think highlights the importance of policy as and in discourse. Second, I want to return to the problem of the ‘effects’ of policy.

Policy as discourse

In the above there is plenty of social agency and social intentionality around. Actors are making meaning, being influential, contesting, constructing responses, dealing with contradictions, attempting representations of policy. Much of this stuff of policy can be engaged with by a realist analysis in the different contexts of policy. But maybe this is a new pluralism. Maybe this is caught within an ideology of agency; by dealing with what is or can be done it misses the big picture. In other words, perhaps it concentrates too much on what those who inhabit policy think about and misses and fails to attend to what they do not think about. Thus we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a *production* of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses. Discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (Foucault 1977 p.49). Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody the meaning and use of propositions and words. Thus, certain possibilities for thought are constructed. Words are ordered and combined in particular ways and other combinations are displaced or excluded. “Discourse may seem of little account” Foucault says “but the prohibitions to which it is subject reveal soon enough its links with desire and power” (1971 pp.11-12). But discourse is “irreducible to language and to speech” (1974 p.49); it is “more” than that. We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. **We** are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows. We do not ‘know’ what we say, we ‘are’ what we say and do. In these terms we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies. This is a system of practices (marketing one’s courses, promoting one’s institution) and a set of values and ethics (forcing unproductive colleagues to take early retirement so that they do not have to be counted in the departmental performativity returns). “Discourses get things done, accomplish real tasks, gather authority” (Said 1986, p.152). There is little opportunity for obvious adversarial responses to this process of subjugation. And we have to note the de-centring of the state in this, discourses are non-reductionist. The state is here the product of discourse, a point in the diagram of power.

In Foucault’s terms we would see policy ensembles that include, for example, the market, management, appraisal and performativity as ‘regimes of truth’ through which people govern themselves and others. This is based upon the production and transformation and effects of true/false distinctions (Smart 1986, p.164) and the application of science and hierarchisation to “problems” in education — like standards, discipline, the quality of teaching, efficient use of resources. These new ‘sciences’ of education are inhabited and disseminated and legitimated by a set of ‘specific’ intellectuals — the Spinks and Caldwells, Sextons, Hargreaves and Hopkins’, and Fidlers and Bowles’. The point of all this is that an exclusive focus upon ‘secondary adjustments’, particularly if this takes the form of ‘naive optimism’, may obscure the discursive limitations acting on and through those adjustments. We may only be able to conceive of the possibilities of response in and through the language,

concepts and vocabulary which the discourse makes available to us. Thus, Offe may be right in stressing that struggle, dispute, conflict and adjustment take place over a pre-established terrain. The essence of this is that there are real struggles over the interpretation and enactment of policies. But these are set within a moving discursive frame which articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment. We read and respond to policies in discursive circumstances that we cannot, or perhaps do not, think about. Also embedded in this is the intellectual work done on and in the 'politics of truth' by the advocates and technicians of policy change, and the 'will to power' and desire of those who find themselves the beneficiaries of new power relations, where power is "exercised in the effect of one action on another action" (Hoy 1986 p.135). Thus, in these terms the effect of policy is primarily discursive; it changes the possibilities we have for thinking 'otherwise'. Thus, it limits our responses to change, and leads us to misunderstand what policy is by misunderstanding what it does. Further, policy as discourse may have the effect of redistributing 'voice'. So that it does not matter what some people say or think, only certain voices can be heard as meaningful or authoritative.

Now the danger here of course is that of 'naive pessimism'. In practice in complex modern societies we are enmeshed in a variety of discordant, incoherent and contradictory discourses, and 'subjugated knowledges' cannot be totally excluded from arenas of policy implementation (see Riseborough 1992). But we do need to recognise and analyse the existence of 'dominant' discourses — like neo-liberalism and management theory — within social policy. At present I can offer no satisfactory closure on the issue of policy as discourse except, weakly perhaps, to reiterate my earlier point about needing more than one good theory to construct one half-decent explanation or account. (I tried this composite theory approach in my [1990] study of the politics of educational reform in the UK.)

Policy effects

I want now to take up some problems remaining in the first section of the paper in a different way. That is by exploring how we might begin to conceptualise policy effects in a way that is neither theoretically high-handed nor trivialising. This also takes me back to my disagreement with Ozga, noted above, about the nature of localised responses to policy as being *ad hoc*, serendipitous etc. In this respect, both those writers who celebrate agency and their critics misunderstand, or are at least imprecise about, what might be meant by the effects or impact of policy. I want to distinguish initially between the generalities and specifics of policy effect.

Again I want to make myself clear; the earlier discussion of policy texts is not intended to convey a conception of policy effects as typically minimal or marginal. It is not that policies have no effects, they do; it is not that those effects are not significant, they are; it is not that those effects are not patterned, they are. But to reiterate, responses (as one vehicle for effects) vary between contexts. Policies from 'above' are not the only constraints and influences upon institutional practice. One difficulty in discussing effects is that the specific and the general are often conflated. The general effects of policies become evident when specific aspects of change and specific sets of responses (within practice) are related together. A neglect of the general is most common in single-focus studies which take one change or one policy text and attempt to determine its impact on practice. Taken in this way the effects of a specific policy may be limited but the general effects of ensembles of policies of different kinds may be different. I would suggest that in the UK at least (probably also the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) the cumulative and general effects of several years of multiple thrusts of educational reform on teachers' work have been profound. Here teachers' work is a general category which encompasses a variety of

separate reforms related to curriculum, assessment, performativity, organisation, pay and conditions. Again though such a generalization has to be handled carefully, in at least two senses. First, there is a danger of idealising the past and portraying a situation in which teachers once had autonomy and now do not (again this is not a zero-sum issue). A formulation like that of Dale (1979) of a shift from licensed to regulated autonomy is a useful tool in thinking about this. What he attempts to capture is a qualitative shift from one kind of autonomy to another; thus he has to specify the different characteristics of the two kinds. And second, the generalisation will not encompass the experience of all types of teachers in all types of situation. Two examples: Teachers in the UK who find themselves in oversubscribed schools of high reputation which can thus select students may find their conditions of work and freedom for manoeuvre very different from teachers in undersubscribed schools of poor reputation which must take what students they can get and will be funded at a lower level accordingly. The recent changes in the UK have had very different implications for classroom teachers and headteachers. The latter, in some respects, and also depending on which schools they are responsible for, find their freedom for manoeuvre and powers in relation to erstwhile colleagues enhanced rather than diminished. They are beneficiaries in the redrawing of the diagram of power.

But, there is a further important distinction to be made in regard to effects, a distinction between what might be called first order and second order effects. First order effects are changes in practice or structure (which are evident in particular sites and across the system as a whole); and second order effects are the impact of these changes on patterns of social access and opportunity and social justice. Walker (1981 p.225) articulates the distinction thus:

... the essential aspect of *social* policies is their distributional implications or outcomes. Social policies may be made implicitly or explicitly, by a wide range of social institutions and groups, including the state. The task of social policy analysis is to evaluate the distributional impact of existing policies and proposals and the rationales underlying them. In such analyses attention will be focussed ... on the behaviour of organisations, professionals and classes in order to balance descriptions of the institutional framework through which the welfare state is administered with analysis of the social production and maintenance of inequality.

One important analytical strategy which provides a mechanism for linking and tracing the discursive origins and possibilities of policy, as well as the intentions embedded in, responses to and effects of policy, is that employed by Edwards, Fitz and Whitty and Edwards, Gewirtz and Whitty in their APS and CTC studies. They are what I would call policy trajectory studies. They 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. Richard Bowe and I have attempted to give some conceptual structure to the trajectory method by adumbrating three contexts of policy-making (Bowe and Ball with Gold 1992) — the context of influence, the context of policy text production and the context(s) of practice. Each context consists of a number of arenas of action — some private and some public. Each context involves struggle and compromise and *ad hocery*. They are loosely-coupled and there is no simple one direction of flow of information between them. Such a trajectory form of analysis may also be a way of ensuring that policy analyses ask critical/theoretical questions, rather than simple problem-solving ones.

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