

## **Improving the policy process: advancing the development of the teacher feedback loop**

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**ABSTRACT:** The need for policy actors to work collaboratively during the policy process receives increasing attention in the literature. A more interactive and iterative approach throughout the policy process involving a broader spectrum of policy actors is indicated. Merely working better to enact policies is insufficient; the processes through which policy is developed are in need of review and improvement. While the values and goals of policy actors typically differ, often there is a shared recognition that action is required to address a problem. It is essential to recognise and act upon this common ground in order to strengthen policy actors' commitment to positive policy outcomes. This paper draws on a case study of policy implementation in the Tasmanian government school system. While the data were gathered chiefly during the enactment of the policy, it became increasingly evident that the influence of the values and goals of those policy actors assigned responsibility for policy implementation should be considered before implementation officially commences. The study's findings support an expansion of teachers' policy roles. Indeed, failure to accord teachers with more influential policy roles may first, contribute to their increased feelings of alienation in the policy process and second, decrease policy effectiveness.

## **Improving the policy process: advancing the development of the teacher feedback loop**

### **Background:**

Policy actors perform their roles in increasingly complex socio-political contexts. This paper draws from aspects of a case study of the policy process in the Tasmanian State School system. The case study:

1. investigated how departmental officers, teachers, principals and the teachers' union responded to one case of mandated system level change;
2. illustrated the range of implementation outcomes; and,
3. explored possible reasons for the differentiated responses identified.

Data were gathered from some teachers who participated in the professional development program during both years of the program (1995 and 1996) and during the first year of implementation (1997) after cessation of the professional development sessions. The researcher's ongoing contact with some of the case study participants enabled a more recent and limited gathering of data in a "post script" stage (2000) of the study.

Some of the data gathered are being used to inform the development of a framework for enabling educators to contribute to the improvement of the policy process.

### **Introduction**

During the last two decades marked changes have occurred in levels of public acceptance of schooling and schooling outcomes. The twin pressures for educational change, and political involvement in influencing change, have flourished. State and federal ministers for education view education as vital to the nation's future (DETYA, 2000). Together with the emergence of a critical public ready to voice their opinions of schooling, this view has resulted in a proliferation of political involvement in public education. Current conservative political ideology, spurred by public interest and concern with student achievements in the public school system, has generated a situation in which politicians, and those policy actors who successfully exert influence over politicians' decision making, have significant sway over the work of schools and teachers (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Bridgman and Davis, 2000).

Decisions once made by education departments and teachers increasingly have become the arena for politicians either initiating policy or responding to a range of publicly expressed concerns. Public opinion about the nature of education and desired outcomes has evolved and intensification in public pressure has emerged. Parents and employers are some of the range of stakeholders who demand the opportunity, indeed the right, to exert influence on the provision of school education (Margison, 1997; Bridgman and Davis, 2000).

Augmented political intervention in education decision making has resulted in the interplay between policy makers and those who enact policy-in the case of school level implementation, principals and teachers-developing into a field that receives considerable attention in the area of policy implementation (Rein, 1983; Fullan, 1993; Lindblom and Woodhouse, 1993; Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Lingard, 1996; Sarason, 1998; Bridgman and Davis, 2000).

## **The policy background and setting:**

During 1993-4 public concern developed about student behaviour problems at Tasmanian government schools; the topic received prominent attention in the Tasmanian print media during this period. Letters to the Editors, feature articles and editorials signalled public disquiet in regard to the behaviour at school of a small number of students, and concern with the effects of their behaviour on teachers, other students and educational programs. There was a united call for something to be done to address what became known as "inappropriate student behaviour" (TEC, 1994a, p.1).

In the words of Hogwood and Gunn (1992, p.68) the issue had become "fashionable"; the Minister for Education had little option but to allay public concern. The Minister asked the Tasmanian Education Council (TEC) to "provide him with advice on inappropriate student behaviour in Tasmania (TEC, 1994b, p.iii). The TEC compiled first, a discussion paper (TEC, 1994a) and finally its report (TEC, 1994b) to which the Department of Education responded (DEA, undated). The issue of inappropriate student behaviour was recognised as a complex one. Broad social factors, for instance the family and the media as well as the "interaction between school and society" (DEA, undated, p.iii) were acknowledged as contributing to the issue. The TEC's final report highlighted the need for sufficient resources to reinforce the implementation of any strategy selected by the Minister. The Department of Education's response acknowledged that "no simplistic or short-term solutions are possible" (DEA, undated, p.1). The process of analysis and consultation that the TEC and the DoE undertook preceded the Minister's announcement, which although it mentioned several measures, centred its focus on a professional development program.

The Minister's announcement was contained within a media statement that announced the professional development program, the Key Teacher Behaviour Management (KTBM) Program. A feature of the Program, according to the media release, was the concept of "a team approach" which the Minister stated had "already worked very successfully in the prep literacy program" where resource teachers worked "alongside classroom teachers" (Beswick, 1995).

## **Policy actors' conflicting views and values**

Politicians and political parties have only a few years to demonstrate the benefits of their policies. However the education system is required to provide students with skills for a lifetime. This is one explanation for typically contrasting "frames of reference" (Dery, 1984, p.4) between policy makers and policy enactors. Conflicting values (Hoy and Miskel, 1987; Rein, 1983; Porter, 1992; Cohen and Barnes, 1993; Proudford, 1998; Kirst and Bulkley, 2000) result in friction between political and educational ideals. Aronowitz and Giroux (cited by Education Policy Response Group, 1999, p.215) pointed out that there are obvious contrasts between "ideological and political interests underlying the dominant thrusts in school reform" and "the traditional role of organising public education around the need to educate students for the maintenance and defence of the tradition and principles necessary for a democratic society". Specifically, Wong, Dreeben, Lynn, Meyer and Sunderman (1996, p.242) observed that "party affiliation, ideology" and "an eye toward election and re-election" are not necessarily linked to "anything to do with the substance of education". Rein (1983, p.195) described a "twin theme of acceptance and disappointment" experienced mutually by stakeholders in the promotion of policy and its enactment. Hoy and Miskel (1987, p.150) delineated the potential for conflict between administrative and professional agendas

Both bureaucrats and professional are expected to have technical expertise in specialized areas, to maintain an objective perspective, and to act impersonally and impartially. Professionals, however, are expected to act in

the best interests of their clients, while bureaucrats are expected to act in the best interests of the organization.

... and went on to state

This apparent conflict between the interests of clients and organization poses a problem for many formal organizations, but for service organizations such as schools ... it may not be a major dilemma. ... the prime beneficiary of [schools] is the client. For [schools], then, the prime objective of both the bureaucrat and the professional is the same-service to clients (p.150).

The expectations held of bureaucrats and professionals by themselves and each other imply that there will be variation in each group's expertise and expectations of policy. This variation anticipates the gap in each group's views, priorities and understanding of each other's role.

The identification of the nature of worthwhile innovation outcomes therefore differs among policy actors. Often teachers view change to be motivated by political gain, or administrative or organisational goals, rather than educational priorities. Teachers place greater value on being able to identify positive benefits of proposed changes for student learning (Lieberman and Miller, 1981). The significance of this has been recognised by Churchill, Williamson and Grady (1997) who observed that teachers characteristically place importance on seeing functional advantages for their professional practice prior to committing themselves to change. Teachers' perceptions that they are overloaded and that their skills are undervalued is representative of broader experiences reported in the literature (Mintrop and Weiler, 1994; Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

The Minister's announcement was perceived by teacher participants in the case study and their union to convey a tacit message that teachers' skills were the prime element to be modified in response to the student behaviour issue. Teachers' perceptions that they are overloaded and that their skills are undervalued is representative of broader experiences reported in the literature (Mintrop and Weiler, 1994; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). The amount of change reflected in, for example, school curricula, pedagogy, assessment, and the use of technology, is unlikely to decrease (Churchill et al, 1997).

The data gathered during the case study suggested a notable discrepancy between the degree of political recognition accorded to resourcing of schools to implement change and that accorded to the need for a professional development program. One of the Key Teachers made the following observation about the lack of commitment to resources

the time [in the KTBM] to present content, three sessions in a year is not enough, the literacy [key teacher] program met regularly over two years, this program [KTBM] no comparison, just a handful of days ... I would reinforce that if they are going to do a program they need to give it substance and personnel to support the program, this key teacher program is pretty low key. [Alan, Blue Gum High School, 1995]

While the Minister's announcement of the KTBM Program had made special mention of the comparison between this program and a previous well-resourced program, his statement was the point at which any resemblance between the two programs ended.

Despite the TEC's statement that "a common complaint was that the DEA promotes and establishes worthwhile approaches ... but fails to ensure their continuity" (TEC, 1994a, p.10), support and resources for the initiative were not announced by the Minister.

### **Acknowledging the roles of teachers in the policy feedback loop**

The tenor of the responses received during the "post script" phase was that the time-frame for consultation during early implementation needs to allow time for school communities and/or school councils to meet to determine how priorities emanating from policy initiative and current established school priorities might be linked. One major outcome of providing schools with this opportunity is that schools may identify support for the program and an accountability process within the school's structure.

Fullan (1994) and McLaughlin (1987) observed, governments or policies are unable to mandate what matters, because "what matters most are local motivation, skills, know-how, and commitment" (Fullan, 1994, p.187). Bridgman and Davis (2000, pp.120-1) expanded on this point when they observed that policies

... must allow some discretion to those who implement and operate the program ... policies fail because people do not respond to the program in ways government expects. If those implementing policy cannot identify the rationale and benefits of policy, its ability to be successfully realised will be reduced.

In relation to local skills and knowledge, one of the study participants, Mike [Other Teacher, Wattle High, 2000] noted

... teachers are one of the key stakeholders and<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> while their views, concerns, etc., would have been indirectly incorporated by the TEC and the Department of Education<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> direct consultation with them *involves* them and may 'unearth' other issues, strategies etc., [otherwise] unenvisaged.

Moreover, Roger [Kangaroo High School, 2000] commented on the possibility of teachers contributing a further dimension to the development of policy "... we [teachers] would like some process beyond this [suspension] - when all the school's efforts have been exhausted re particular students<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> teachers *may* provide some positive ideas" [participant's emphasis].

These teachers' perceptions find broader support in the literature. For example, Conley (1996) observed that the roles of all school community members need to change to enable schools to make positive contributions to students' education and the wider community.

A professional approach entails interacting with policy rather than merely responding to it. Hoy and Miskel (1987, p.150) described several facets of teachers' "professional orientation" including

... technical competence acquired through long training; adherence to a set of professional norms that includes a service ideal, objectivity, impersonality, and impartiality; a colleague-oriented reference group; autonomy in professional decision making; and self-imposed control based upon knowledge, standards, and peer review.

Lingard (1996, p.66) identified the risk in adopting a position which assumes that teachers are "simply the bearers or enablers of policy developed elsewhere." Hill (1999, p.423) highlighted an active role for school personnel when he stated that typically "standard government-funded reform programs treat the school as a black box: things are done to or for the school, not by it". If those implementing policy cannot identify the rationale and benefits of policy, its ability to be successfully realised will be reduced.

Those professionals who enact policy mediate its intent. Parsons (1995, p.263) highlighted how during implementation, professionals, including teachers, can "make or break policy". This mediation of policy might be viewed as potentially threatening to its integrity; this idea is

rejected by Conley (1996, p.215) who highlighted that schools which successfully implement change are likely to have "professionalized" the teacher's role characterised by collaborative decision making particularly in relation to programs and pedagogy.

Positive outcomes are evident in the report by one Key Teacher that he felt supported, indeed trusted, by his school

The school let me decide what I would do. I am acting as a consultant, working with first year teachers and working in more with the Guidance Officer and Social Worker. [Bob, Wattle High School, 1995]

Bob's freedom to make decisions was viewed positively by one of his colleagues who participated in the study and who commented

When the program was announced we applied to participate because of a perceived need in the area. ... From my perspective the KTBM program has facilitated a lot of professional growth on the part of the Key Teacher. His contribution to policy development [at the school level] and school-wide practice has been instrumental in extending the behaviour management repertoire of strategies of many teachers. The program then, is going a long way towards creating the

type of supportive school environment we would like to provide for our students. [Mike,

Wattle High - colleague of Key Teacher, 1996]

Wattle High appears to have placed trust in the professional decision making of its Key Teacher, Bob. Furthermore, Mike's observations suggested that this trust was well placed. Bob identified a need for accountability first, to the group participating in the professional development sessions and second, to his school. A professional perspective was evident in the following suggestion made by Bob for increasing the opportunities for obligations to colleagues within the program and to colleagues and others in schools

We got lots of theory and there was an assumption that we would take practice back, perhaps we should have had "homework" or tasks to do between session to peg the theory to practice and to report back to the group. [Bob, Wattle High School, 1995]

Bob [Key Teacher, Wattle High School, 2000] commented that in the implementation planning stage "unless teachers feel that they have an input into planning they are unlikely to 'get on board' ". Furthermore, Bob made explicit his belief that, in the present policy context, "being consulted" was the same as being "told" and that teacher representation at meetings prior to establishing details of professional development was essential in order that they [teachers] feel "listened to". However, current practice indicates that a trend has been established in which teachers are demoted to the "status of low-level employees or civil servants whose main function is to implement reforms decided by experts in the upper levels of state and educational bureaucracies" (Aronowitz and Giroux, cited by Education Policy Response Group, 1999, p.215).

### **Feedback from teachers who participated in the case study**

The study participants identified a number of issues that may have resulted from limited funding of the program:

- The allocation of insufficient time to plan and implement follow-up work in their own schools,
- a need to explore in some detail models of Supportive School Environment type programs beyond the local (Tasmanian) context,
- the lack of resourcing, in particular time to give more attention to the content and processes which they encountered through the professional development, and,
- the low profile of the KTBM Program compared to other "key teacher" programs.

In light of the issue relating to teachers and professionalism, it is relevant to note that responses from the case study participants reflected a constructive and professional approach to policy implementation.

Frank [Wombat High, 1996] indicated that his school needs were the primary influence on his views of what he wanted from the professional development program

I wanted included a review process, processes and procedures we could use to evaluate our SSE (Supportive School Environment) processes ... our need of having review strategies was not met, except one strategy ... briefly explained.

Frank expressed a need to learn ways in which he, and his colleagues, could take responsibility for evaluating his school's processes in student behaviour management.

The previous year, Frank had commented

My 1996 involvement [in the program] will be very dependent on what is offered to fit in with our school's current priorities. [Frank, Wombat High, 1995]

This observation suggested that Frank's school's decision to participate in professional development would depend primarily on careful consideration of already existing school priorities in relation to perceived benefits from continued participation in the professional development program.

To enable teachers and school communities to participate more meaningfully in the policy process they need time, support and understanding. Fullan (1991, p.96) observed "one of the basic reasons why planning fails is the planners or decision-makers of change unaware of the situations that potential implementers are facing". Teachers need time to make "productive use of their collective energy" (Donohoe, 1997, p.170).

An appropriate time frame throughout the policy process is vital. This observation was reflected in comments by Frank (Wombat High, 1996)

A lot of our priorities have been established and earlier notice of the program would have been useful even though we have allocated notional money.

Lack of time was a problem identified throughout the program and reflected, for example in Mark's comments

... at school ... there's been no time, we received stimulation and skills [at the professional development sessions] ... at school opportunities are very limited ... [Mark,

Thylacine High School, 1995]

These comments by Mark and Frank suggest that some schools either did not plan or were unable to plan appropriately for successful implementation-maybe this was attributable to school factors, or the lack of time allowed for schools to establish suitable structures and processes. Furthermore, the following observations by Mike points to the particular need for support for the teachers who are leading the initiative in the individual schools

As with any 'special' position, their [in this case, Key Teachers'] credibility with colleagues is 'on the line' and they need to perform from 'day one'. Some colleagues may have seen it all as a cynical political exercise. Mike [Other Teacher, Wattle High School, 2000]

Donohoe (1997) highlighted the issue and related problems of failure to formally recognise that teachers need time to perform expected roles. While the situation addressed by Donohoe is described in North American terms, the ability to extend it to the Australian context is evident

Just as the state requires a certain number of classroom minutes and a certain number of teaching days a year, it should find a way to formalise a certain amount of collective staff time ... . Until that happens, all collective time is ad hoc, vulnerable to shifts in leadership and most likely thought of as an add-on rather than as an integrated activity (Donohoe, 1997, p.172).

The teachers who participated in the "post script" expressed a variety of reasons for believing teachers should be better included in the policy process. Their responses suggest that

- teachers offer the policy process a perspective grounded in professional approaches to education as implementers of policy and tempered with local knowledge and understanding of a range of local contexts and,
- the potential for successful implementation of a particular policy by teachers is enhanced by their understanding and knowledge of the policy.

The teachers believed they had valuable input they could offer during policy development, implementation and evaluation. One teacher who was appointed to a district committee as a Key Teacher representative expressed disappointment with the lack of opportunity to provide feedback.

There was very little opportunity to feed back anything. In the \_\_\_\_\_ District it [any consultation to obtain feedback] was all informal. [Bob, Wattle High, 2000]

Proudford (1998) found that Queensland teachers who participated in a research project experienced a sense of alienation by top-down educational policy and the intensification of their traditional role of implementing policy. The Tasmanian teachers who participated in the case study indicated a preference for influencing the policy process. Proudford's emancipatory stance, comprised of (1) professional confidence, (2) professional interpretation, and (3) professional consciousness, is a concept which deserves further exploration and which might assist in working with teachers to identify ways in which they might want to achieve this influence.

## Conclusions

Three themes can be identified from the data gathered during this case study. Furthermore the issues related to these themes are consistent with those in the literature relating to the educational policy process.

The themes identified include:

- a reaffirmation of the complexities of the policy process and the roles of policy actors which *mediate* on policy;
- the need to provide sufficient resources, including time, to do the job but also to demonstrate commitment to policy rhetoric;
- the need to ensure that there is a number of policies that can be managed well .

Consequently, *policy making* and *policy implementation* should be viewed as a more iterative and interactive process. Concomitant with this view is the notion that teachers have more to offer the policy process than typically they are enabled to contribute. Furthermore, they should be consulted with to identify ways in which they believe they can contribute. The policy process generally is characterised by the splitting of the policy process into two levels- policy making and policy implementation; transforming this approach will have a propensity to enable a sharing of the skills, knowledge and expertise of policy actors. Such sharing will expand understanding and increase the likelihood that skills, knowledge and expertise are used more flexibly and productively during the policy process.

Second, the policy process should support the establishment of a time-line that encourages and enables schools to identify the links between their local priorities and those of the school system. Allowing councils or local decision making bodies within school communities to implement structures for support and accountability purposes calls on teachers' professionalism and generates concurrent positive outcomes for school change. It is vital that teachers' capacity to influence policy be acknowledged and engaged beneficially; it is this assertion that presents a major challenge for administrators to place greater trust in teachers' professionalism, thereby increasingly including them in the policy process.

Finally, lessening the number of policies with which the school system and individual schools have to cope at any one time will encourage the reciprocation of trust. A reduction in the number of policies will free resources for the support of policies that have a broad base of support amongst policy actors. It is crucial that school communities are supported in identifying links between local priorities and needs and those of the government. Furthermore, the incorporation and implementation of policy while taking cognisance of local priorities and needs will lead to a policy process that is more likely to be accomplished.

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