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Values for evaluation

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Abstract:

This paper reports the findings of a systematic review, commissioned by the DfES, which sought to analyse what Further Education Practitioners say about implementing national educational policy at the local level. This review raised important issues about practitioner autonomy, professional values and operative forms of quality assurance. Having recently been awarded Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT) status as part of a national DfES initiative, we are interested in exploring how the findings from the review and other associated research could be used to guide the implementation, quality assurance and the evaluation of the activities of the CETT.

It is argued that the model for implementing national policy at the local level devised in the light of this research carries real advantages. It opens up a space for the exercise of democratic and inclusive professional values, local autonomy the application of local knowledge, capable of improving pedagogical practice and hence more effective and efficient implementations of policy. Furthermore, the strategy is capable of generating more authentic forms of evidence to meet concerns of accountability and value for money.

A) Introduction

This paper reports, analyses and interprets the findings of a systematic review conducted by the authors for the Department of Education and Skills under the guidance of the EPPI Centre (Institute of Education, University of London). The topic we investigated was: "Practitioner's experiences of implementing national post 16 education policy at the local level". In order to focus this investigation we sought evidence in recent research that addressed the specific question "What practitioners say about their experiences of implementing national post 16 education policies at the local level?" This review was carried out in three stages. First, we conducted a systematic search of the literature to identify studies and reports that could be expected to contain discussion, interviews and thematic analysis of specified topic. Second, the collected data was analysed to identify the common themes and issues raised by practitioners across the different research projects. Third, the authors developed an interpretation of these common themes and drew up three practical recommendations. These recommendations point toward ways in which policy could be implemented that were better able to take account of the concerns and priorities of frontline practitioners and their local working context.

This paper is arranged in three parts: the first section offers a short introduction to the systematic review process. The way in which the systematic review process seeks to promote objectivity and clarity are outlined and concerns about the credibility of this process are touched upon. Second, the paper moves on to present the five findings of the review and illustrates these with quotations from practitioners and researchers. Finally, the paper focuses on two of the finding statements, the ways in which policy is mediated and the view that pedagogic agency and the ability to exercise professional judgement were currently constrained. The relationship that currently pertains between these two themes is explored and its negative consequences spelled out. Recommendations are then presented that could work to ameliorate these difficulties.

PART 1. What is a systematic review.

This section introduces the EPPI systematic review process, identifying its key aims and the stages of its enactment. The second part of this opening section then introduces the topic of this review and summarises the specific steps taken to reach the findings statements. In passing, this section also identifies some of epistemological concerns raised about the systematic review process, concentrating on those criticisms that echoed this review team's concerns.

Overview

The overall aim of a systematic review is to generate an impartial summary of a particular field of academic research. In this way the review make available to a wide audience the most significant research findings in a given area. Expanding its reach beyond those medical arenas where an interest in physical and/or biological processes predominate, the systematic review process is now applied to educational practice. As Berliner notes, this expansion the systematic review methodology moves *not* from hard to soft science but from the easy to study, physical processes, to the hard and messy subject of human practice. The human area is so hard to study because differences in local conditions and social attitudes and human reflexivity all work to complicate the understanding of phenomena. At the very least, Berliner's concerns serve to caution us against the desire to read the findings of human focused systematic review as having the same direct implications for future practice as do medical reviews. (Berliner, D. C. (2002))

Putting these preliminary concerns to one side let us return to the outline of systematic review process. Evans & Benefield identify seven key features of such reviews:

1. an explicit research question is addressed
2. transparent methods are used for searching for relevant studies;

3. clear criteria for assessing the quality of studies (both qualitative and quantitative) are used.
4. clear criteria for including or excluding studies based on the scope of the review are set.
5. joint reviewing of the articles selected for indepth review is utilised to reduce bias
6. The outcome are presented as clear statements of findings.
7. Quality assessment procedures are conducted at all stages.

Adapted from Evans & Benefield, 2001, p. 529)

The practical implementation of this process comes in two parts. Oakley summarises it thus:

...[1] a [screening and] mapping stage, in which relevant literature is captured and systematically keyworded... and [2] an in-depth review stage, in which a subset of the literature ... is examined and interrogated in more detail and data extracted from primary studies.

(Oakley, 2003, p. 24. Also see the specific EPPI-Centre documents: 2002a, 2002b and 2002c).

Put in simple terms, those conducting a systematic review are required to search for relevant studies, review the material and offer a clear summary of the field of research and quality assure the process. In some instances they are also invited to offer an interpretation of the findings and make recommendations.

The Sunderland systematic review.

The Sunderland review sought to investigate the local factors which influence the implementation of Government educational initiatives. In particular, it aimed to

illuminate the human experience of implementing these initiatives in the post 16 area.

The review therefore began with the search for studies and reports that could be expected to address, in some respect, the question “*What do practitioners say about their experiences of implementing national post 16 education policy at the local level?*” The aim of the mapping stage being to generate a broad characterisation of the research material available. We began by drawing up a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria for searching. These criteria included looking only for studies written in English between 1976 -2007, and based upon studies of UK Education policy in the field of post compulsory education sector and related to the practitioner experience of policy implementation in post 16 education and training was targeted. We then searched electronic data bases and by hand and identified 512 potentially relevant reports and studies.

Next, these potentially interesting studies were filtered in a two stage screening process. First, titles and abstracts were screened and at this stage 323 reports were excluded. This meant that 189 reports went forward for full text screening. To complete this stage we acquired full text versions of the material and then screened again looking for indications that the reports contained practitioner views of policy implementation. This second round of screening reduced the 189 reports down to 62 reports. (Details of this process are summarised in appendix 1. Figure 1.)

These 62 items were then ‘coded’ to identify key themes. That is, the texts were analysed to identify the specific topics, discussion and/or commentary they contained. In practical terms this meant identifying features such as the subjects of the research project: were they tutors, managers or principals and so forth. The context of the research, was it: FE colleges, sixth form colleges or community setting etc. The aim of this initial round of coding was to identify, within the 62 studies, common themes, objects of study, lines of commentary. This allowed us to draw up a map and then report back to DfES.

The findings of the mapping stage can be summarised, in broad terms, as follows: all 62 reports contained responses from frontline practitioners about the implementation of policy. Approximately, two thirds of the views collected were from practitioners (tutors) who worked directly with learners with the remaining third coming from senior and middle managers. The majority of reports studied practice in further education colleges, with a smaller number of reports reflected the experience of practitioners in Adult and Community settings. One reports compared Further Education Colleges with Sixth Form Colleges. The reports that addressed Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL considered practitioner experience across sectors. Policies referred to by practitioners tended to reflect the policy priorities of their institutions at particular times. These policies invariably originated outside of the institution, instigated by national directives and priorities and driven by funding mechanisms, targets and quality initiatives and regimes. Examples of the initiatives discussed by practitioners included Skills for Life, Key Skills, competence based approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, inspection, terms and conditions of tutors' employment, policy levers (targets and funding), compliance, GNVQs, 'best practice' and 'neo-liberal management techniques', levels of professional qualification, workload and individualised learning. When speaking about their own day to day practice and the problems they encountered practitioners spoke mainly in terms of professionalism and professional values and the culture of their organisation. (see Chapter Three of the Full Technical Report for a fuller account of this mapping stage and its findings.)

The in-depth review stage was guided by the question: *What do practitioners in FE colleges say about the conditions, attitudes and implementation of National Education Policy?* The aim of this second stage of the review being to identify and scrutinize a specific sub set of studies to generate a number of findings statements. This second phase of the systematic review consisted of: identifying a specific sub set of studies to concentrate on, extracting the data from these studies, weighting the evidence and finally synthesing finding statements from the data. Additional inclusion/exclusion criteria were identified and applied to the 62 reports. This process identified 10 studies (represented in 14 reports) that could profitably be put forward for in-depth analysis.

A second round of coding revealed the following features of these 10 studies. All of the studies generated data using qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews predominated but these were sometimes supplemented with reflective diaries, group working and observation. Although the theoretical perspectives invoked to make sense of data varied between the studies they all shared a key feature, namely, that their investigations could be used to highlight the attitudes (perceptions, views and beliefs) of practitioners and conditions (working context) and their relationship to the implementation of national policy in the local setting. (Details of the 10 studies included for in-depth review are to be found in Appendix 2)

The studies selected for in-depth review were analysed using the 'EPPI-Centre data extraction and coding tool for education studies V2.0'. This produced a very detailed breakdown of the content of each study. This analysis was then used to weigh the evidence (using the EPPI-Centre weight of evidence (WoE) framework) and then to synthesise the 'data' to generate the review finding statements. In practical terms this meant that each team member took a sub set of reports and scrutinised the content to identify any passages that discussed the three key terms that framed the in-depth review question (attitudes, conditions and implementation of policy). The 'data' extracted was then sorted into two kinds: a) direct quotes from practitioners and b) analysis and implications drawn by the report authors.

The team then met to synthesise the 'data' to generate findings of the review. This involved, as team, discussing the direct quotations and thematic analysis drawn from the ten studies and organised the material in to themed clusters. Next, the team discussed each cluster of quotes and themes to develop a summary statement that spoke for all of this material. This statement then became the finding statement.

Before moving on to report the review findings, it is now timely to consider a second criticism of the systematic review process. Maggie Maclure describes the whole systematic review process as a 'low trust model' designed to position academics as accountable and managed producers of data. She argues that this system puts the academic in the position of one who is continually "controlled, counted and quality assured" (2005: 403-404). We would take issue with the binary distinction underpinning this description. It is simply not a straight forward choice between occupying either the position of a free, radical, marginalised, academic voice or

occupying the position of a meekly accepting, compliant, lapdog. While the formal EEPI processes can seem excessive and uneconomical at times the ability of the EPPI strategies to help a diverse team, made up of academics with different specialisms and Civil Servants to work together in a way that is reasonably clear to all parties carries real advantages. It helps the team to reach shared decisions and the broader collaboration worked to keep the project focused and promote the shared understanding of outcomes. In this respect the potential of the systematic review process to promote informed collaboration is its strength. (also see: Nind 2006)

Where Maclure's critique does strike home is when she discusses the uncertainty and uncanniness associated with both of reading and authorship. (2004: 409) The reading process is uncertain insofar as different readers can be expected to find different meanings from a given text, according to their background assumptions and their current priorities and beliefs. In relation to writing, Maclure foregrounds the peculiarities of authorship, the way things happen out of sight, the way outcomes are never wholly predictable, the way understanding and interpretation leave no traces while they are happening. (2004: 409) Without necessarily endorsing post-structural accounts of iteration the review team did feel that the in-depth coding and systematising of finding-statements raised serious epistemological concerns. The tension was felt keenly between the positivist call and its preference for facts, quantitative analysis and 'neutral' objectivity and the need to attend to the qualitative and to listen to responsible, professional judgements. When generating the finding statements the team did work collaboratively and did seek to make their thinking as explicit as possible but nevertheless they did feel that *situated judgement* continued to play the crucial role in shaping the finding-statements. Maclure's reference to the "unseen" is useful because it marks the way the judgement is a leap, a performative act (in the sense of Austin) that both draws on the individual's past experience, their ability to broaching the topic in manner that makes sense to them but also an act that can broach, or break with that past and to find new meanings. The potential of the broaching aspect is realised precisely when we collaborate across difference to find workable solutions.

PART 2. The findings of this systematic review.

This systematic review generated five finding statements. This section of the paper presents each of these finding statements and explores what each statement implies with reference to quotations and thematic analysis drawn from the original research.

1. **1. National policy is mediated in virtually all local settings.**

The idea that national policy is mediated in local settings drew on Shain and Gleeson (1999), ((RES: 139-25-0105) Coffield and Edward (2007a) and Spours et al (2007)). Shain and Gleeson's invitation to view many practitioners as 'strategic compliers' captures the way in which policy is manipulated by practitioners at various institutional levels. Spours amplifies this sense of national policy undergoing transformation as it moves from one arena to another with his use of the idea of policy 'translation' and the danger that the original policy intentions are lost or subverted. It might be more accurate to say that policy has the power to stimulate the need to find meaning that is relevant to a particular local setting. In other words, the meaning of policy can be found in translation, a meaning that makes sense in a local context as part of a collaborative endeavour. (Gregson et al :2008)

This positive potential in policy mediation to stimulate locally relevant forms of implementation can be contrasted with its negative counterpart. In this instance policy is implemented in ways that diminish the opportunities to find local meaning and instead keep to impose a meaning into that local environment. For example, the following practitioner statement records a form of concerned resignation as policy is mediated in ways that enforce meaning, priorities and forms of action: '... we are told basically, 'This is what you are going to do: this is what we suggest you do and your funding depends on it', then is that not what we do?' (Coffield & Edward 2007a p13). Policy mediation is shown by these studies to appear in at least two forms.

2. 2. Practitioners commonly respond pragmatically to local policy making it work for the benefit of their institution/learners.

A number of articles, Bathmaker (2005), Bolton and Hyland (2003), ((RES: 139-25-0105) Coffield and Edward (2007a)), Gleeson (2001), Robson et al (2004), explored the way in which practitioners responded to policy through a reciprocal process of interaction. On the one hand, they adapted themselves and their institutions to policy innovations. On the other hand, they adapted policy to their local settings. In a forceful piece of work Bolton and Hyland (2003) demonstrate how a policy articulated through a problematic 'skills' discourse has been made to carry real and positive meanings for learners through the translating work of tutors. That is, they find in translation local meanings for the policy, that make practical local sense to themselves and their learner. Tellingly, Bolton and Hyland also illustrate just how many different local 'translations' can be wrung from the same policy statement. Overall, this study serves to illustrate just how effective local collaborative interpretative practice can be. This pragmatic and effective engagement with policy illustrated in the following quote 'We give students an aim to go as high as they can, and we try to give them an incentive to stay in training because it's a difficult industry to stay in ... it is about the actual pride in the work, which is a great motivator and that does not appear on the NVQ.' (Robson et al 2004 p189) The pragmatic response to policy is found in the expressed determination to work with the NVQ framework and supplement it in way that enhance the learning experience. However, it should also be noted that the review team also found evidence in the in-depth review articles that practitioners, situated at different levels within the organisation, had different understandings of what 'making policy work for the benefit of the institution and/or the learner, could and should be like. This theme is taken up again under the next heading.

3. 3. Practitioners balance the duties placed on them by both marketising and pedagogic discourses.

A number of articles considered the role of practitioners as they strived to negotiate the currents of marketising and pedagogic discourse in their local settings: ((RES: 139-25-0105) Coffield and Edward (2007b)), Gleeson (2001), ((L139251025) James and Gleeson (2007)), Ozga and Deem (2001). The analysis of practitioner views offered by Coffield and Edward's show how tutors struggle to translate priorities often expressed in marketised terms into form that is compatible with their understanding of the pedagogical needs of their local learners. This state of affairs is summed up in the following pithy statement: (Paul drop in centre tutor) 'it feels to me like the audit process assumes a certain mode of learning, the students turn up and sit in the classrooms, which we simply don't do.' (Gleeson et al 2005 p454) The tutor in this quote expresses exasperation at the marketised image of the student as orderly consumer that simply cannot be made to square up with the far more messy reality of the drop in centre and the pedagogic strategies that are actually appropriate to this context.

4. **4. Practitioners (tutors in particular), identified concerns about their ability to apply pedagogic knowledge and exercise professional judgement (agency).**

The majority of in-depth review articles raised concerns about the ability of practitioners to exercise pedagogic agency: Bathmaker (2005), Briggs (2005), ((RES: 139-25-0105) Coffield and Edward (2007a), Edward et al (2007)), Gleeson (2001), ((L139251025) Gleeson et al (2005) and James and Gleeson (2007)), Hamilton and Hillier (2006), , Ozga and Deem (2001), Robson et al (2004), Shain and Gleeson (1999). Hamilton and Hillier's (2006) historical investigation into how pedagogic agency has been empowered or constrained in particular teaching regimes is illuminating. One striking contrast drawn by the text is between early literacy pioneers and the contemporaries. The early pioneers were free to practice their pedagogy as they saw fit but they were also constrained by lack of formal, reliable funding. The contemporary practitioner, by contrast, enjoys higher status and a more stable funding regime also but has imposed upon them a very specific forms of curriculum, targeted outcomes and quality assurance regime. The contrast works to draw attention to the limited sense of agency the contemporary practitioner feels. It draws attention to the way in which priorities are imposed from the outside. The tutor who states: 'We don't know what's happening as tutors—we're nearly always the last to know. And it's not been the programme managers' fault: they don't know

either' (Edward et al 2007 p161) makes explicit a sense of dislocation between what it is they are being asked to do and what it is they see to significant about local needs.

5. **5. Tutors sometimes expressed attitudes of professional and pedagogic insecurity.**

This statement reinforces finding-statement 4. It sums up a view expressed by practitioners (Edwards and Coffield 2007), that frontline tutors were sometimes unsure whether they had, in their day-to-day practice, struck the best balance between local pedagogic and the marketised priorities imposed from outside. This insecurity could be seen to be stimulated by three factors: the demands of local management for a more flexible work force, a context of policy initiative overload and the inability to square up the imposed priorities with their own understanding of local need. Statements that sum up this sense of disconnectedness, having to act in ways that do not necessary make sense are found in the following statements: 'The management will tell you that ... it comes from outside, because the government wants us to do things this way and the funding is this way. So you don't know who to blame for the changes ...' ((RES: 139-25-0105) (Edward et al 2007 p161)) and (JM1/4) 'We don't know why decisions have been made. It's just very, very isolated.' ((RES: 139-25-0105) (Edward et al 2007 p16)).

PART 3. Interpreting the findings of this systematic review.

In the final section of the paper we focus on interpreting the finding-statements. This section is divided into two parts: first, we explore the significance of the finding-statements for understanding the current preferred model of policy implementation utilised in the English post compulsory education sector. We consider the possible interrelatedness of these findings and examine the significance of this inter-relatedness to understanding the negative consequences of the currently preferred strategies of policy implementation in England. The second part of the this final

section, considers, briefly, two strategies that could be employed to mitigate these short comings.

The interpretation of the review findings

The first significant aspect of the review findings is located at the heart of the statement that *national policy is mediated in virtually all local settings*. The term mediation alludes to the complexity of the policy implementation process and signals an inherent unpredictability or uncertainty associated with this process. The double edged nature of the term mediation draws attention to this inherent uncertainty. The term alludes both to the mediator who facilitates progress, who finds the common ground, but also to the mediator who thwarts development, subverting discussion and forwarding only their own interests. The ideas that policy is mediated and that this mediation maybe more or less 'successful' is the first issue the review foregrounds.

The challenge that the 'uncertainty' associated with mediation puts before policy makers and administrators is how best to manage the implementation process so that the original intended outcomes are achieved. The studies considered in the in-depth review point to the fact that, at present in England, there has been an almost unanimous preference to manage this uncertainty with the levers of targets, funding and quality assurance. The direct and forceful way these mechanisms can function to shape and control the implementation process explains their appeal but also draws attention away from their inherent limitations. The very possibility of setting, monitoring and enforcing clear sets of targets seems to pull in opposition to the possibilities of establishing fast, tailored responses that are highly attuned to very specific, changeable, local even individual needs. This audit system also transfers a substantial portion of funding away from frontline activity to audit processes. These short-comings are discussed in greater detail below in relation to the practitioners in English PCET settings. The tentative implication to be drawn here is that there is the need to develop a strategy for policy implementation that is able to manage the

uncertainty associated with mediation, that is economical, but which is also able to promote and encourage responsive, pedagogically effective local initiatives.

The second significant aspect of the review findings that deserves careful consideration is located in the statements that claims that, *practitioners, tutors in particular, identified concerns about their ability to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency, tutors sometimes expressed attitudes of professional and pedagogic insecurity*. This statement focuses attention on the frontline tutor's concerns about their ability to act effectively and their insecurity and possible inertia. Michael Fielding's work, inspired by Linda Alcoff, on epistemic agency offers us an account of this sense of dislocatedness that relates it to a teaching contexts dominated by targets and audit.

Three aspects of Fieldings discussion are relevant in this context. First, he utilises the term epistemic agency to mark the human capacity to 'construct legitimate knowledge'. (2004: 305) The term epistemic agency serves to draw attention to the work we do to identify the significant in any given situation. Second, Fielding foregrounds the way this epistemological work, that is the speech acts that mark out the significant, will be shaped in part by the speaker's location. That is, those located in different contexts, occupying different standpoints, will tend to find meanings in a text or directive that can vary depending those differences in location. Echoing Maclure, we might expect to find that people located in different ways will see things differently, they will be inclined to find a different sense in the same stimulus, they will have different priorities. ((2004:299) The importance of location to understanding meaning is also discussed, albeit in different theoretical registers, by Phil Hodgkinson (2007) and Ken Spours (2007)). Finally, Fielding observes that different standpoints and the meanings they find, enjoy different levels of privilege, that is, some positions expect the right to speak while others have come to expect to be marginalised. (2004:300)

When we apply this description across to the task of understanding the review themes of policy mediation and constrained pedagogic agency the following explanation can be generated. The current policy levers of targets, funding and quality assurance operate to manage the difference that location makes in ways that

appears to offer control and certainty. From the perspective of those tasked to manage the implementation of education policy the significance of the levers of clear targets linked to funding and high stakes audit systems is that they appear to offer robust ways to raise outcomes. What is, perhaps, less obvious from such locations is disabling effects of these mechanisms on frontline practice. In setting micro targets these implementation strategies establish an order of epistemological significance that is often at odds with local priorities. In a very real sense these strategies end up speaking for frontline tutors, insofar as they claim epistemic priority and name what is important in the local context. In this they serve to marginalise the local voice and its assessment of the epistemologically significant. In such situations the 'the knowing agent', the teacher, with all her practical and learner centred concerns, is separated from 'the object of knowledge', the imposed priorities. To find oneself in such a position is to be disempowered, to feel dislocated, to be constrained in action. Expressions of constrained pedagogic agency on this reading would reflect the inability to exercise epistemic agency. Frontline evaluations of practice and their own perceptions of when and how they should develop their practice conflict with 'authorised' discourses of evaluation and development that are imposed from the outside.

The troubling consequence of this separation of the local knowing agent from the object of knowledge is that the motivation to evaluate and develop becomes externalised away from the individual or team and responsibility for the improvement of practice becomes reduced to the production of evidence of compliance. In such a situation the discourses of responsibility and the possibilities for agency become unstable, being at one moment highly defuse, at the next focused intensely on individual practitioners. One credible explanation for the inertia and insecurity practitioners experience is located in this separation of the discourses of evaluation and the improvement of practice from the individual tutor or team. On this reading *the challenge the review identifies is that establishing practical ways of organising policy implementation that foster the tutor's epistemic capacities and encourages them to take responsibility for developing their local practice.* The challenge here is to bypass the ambiguous ways of situating practitioners apart from their priorities and establish the conditions that inspire relevant, creative and effective practitioner

responses to unique local conditions in ways that still allow some level of control and quality assurance.

Recommendations.

We identify three areas where practical steps could be taken to restore a sense epistemic agency to frontline practitioners in the context of enhancing policy implementation.

Recommendations: policy

There is a need for less education policy initiatives in the PCET sector in England. As Coffield and Edward note in the last ten years in the PCET sector we have had multiple initiatives and but no overarching strategy. (Coffield 2007) In educational contexts practitioners are inundated with initiatives there is little time to get to grips with the initiative, to make it work locally, to then evaluate its effects and amend its implementation.

The risk, expressed in practitioner comments about pedagogic constraint, is that the imposition of multiple, every changing, priorities creates a working context over populated with imposed epistemological significances. Two risks are associated with this over populated context. First, in such a context the local organisation risks losing its focus as it strives to demonstrate compliance on a large number of fronts. Second, there is a risk that locally defined significant features are overwhelmed with imposed priorities and practitioners experience a sense of disconnectedness and inertia. *If these risks were perceived to be real then one way to reduce these dangers would be to adopt an iterative approach to education reform and abandon the jumping, headline grabbing multiple initiatives that currently dominate education reform.*

Recommendations relating to implementation.

All policy must be mediated in its implementation. The concerns practitioners express about their loss of pedagogic agency in the context of the current policy

levers, targets, funding and high cost audit, foreground the real cost of managing implementation in the current way. The size of this neglected cost becomes apparent when we recall just how important the teacher-learner relationship is the learners development. In this paper we have drawn on the work of Fielding to explain the link between the current policy implementation levers and the practitioners perceived sense of dislocation.

In order to avoid these dangers we suggest the development of collaborative forums where practitioners, in consultation with administrators, find meanings relevant to their local practice in broad policy statements. Finding significant local meaning in policy, generated by hard collaborative discussion, will carry the singular advantage of making the decision reached relevant and comprehensible to those who must enact policy on the frontline. The key advantages of this approach are seen, first, in its ability to make space for local knowledge so that it can positively influence the implementation process. This is seen in the ability of local knowledge to contribute to finding meaning in policy that is relevant to local teachers and managers. In other words, a mechanism exists to accommodate national policy to the specificity of local contexts. Further, collaborative forums will generate feedback on how implementation is progressing. This valuable feedback can then be utilised to amend the local objectives guiding policy implementation. The responsive potential of this iterative approach stands in stark contrast to the blind fixation associated with non-negotiable fixed term targets.

The second key advantage of this collaborative approach is its ability to tie all of the collaborative partners into being responsible for the development and success of local implementation. In contrast, to the current arrangements that tend to disassociate the target setter from the target achiever, this model encourages a mutual responsibility and respect, across different standpoints. It makes possible a the shared understanding of the locally relevant and effective form.

Recommendations relating to practitioners and local managers

Finally, if the practitioner is to enjoy more local autonomy and be expected to contribute constructively to policy implementation then it is crucial to support these practitioners through professional development activity. This implies making a concerted effort to enhance the pedagogical knowledge of practitioners. Prioritising professional development will not only enhance the practitioners ability to exercise pedagogic agency to improve learning outcomes. It will also improve the quality of the local contribution to the work of translating policy into relevant and effective local forms. Further, it could improve the quality of the feedback that local practitioners can provide.

In conclusion

The findings of the systematic review into what practitioners say about national policy implementation at the local level suggest careful consideration should be given to how best to implement policy. It has been argued in this paper that the current preferred strategy of implementation, levers of targets, funding and high stakes audit, carries two unacknowledged detrimental effects. First, the operation of these mechanisms of dissemination operate to constrict the practitioners to exercise what we have called pedagogic agency. Second, they operate in ways that exclude the potential of collaboration to effectively localise policy and iteratively develop its form.

An alternative model of implementation developed that exploited the potential of collaboration to make policy relevant to local settings will require the further development of, at least, two elements. First, quality collaborative forums need to be established that acknowledge the importance of local knowledge. These forums will need to support the translation of national policy goals into locally relevant forms. Further, these forums would encourage tutors, local managers and administrators to share responsibility for the decisions made and also encourage the team strive to modify the local form in relation to local developments and feedback.

Second, the quality of the local understandings of pedagogy will be crucial to collaborative policy implementation. This will require the prioritisation of professional development. This professional development will play a crucial role in informing both the policy translation process and its evaluation and subsequent modification.

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