

Interrogating the Discourse of Educational Policy Analysis: Insights from the South African Outcomes Based Education (OBE)

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Abstract

This conceptual paper proffered critical examination of the subject of educational policy analysis and the factors, theories and methods that shape the process. The paper thus begins with an overview of major debates in policy sociology including the conceptualizations of policy as process, text and discourse before delving into the discussion of the models of policy-analysis often articulated in social and political science disciplines. The factors influencing policy-making are highlighted and so are the shifts in education policy with examples drawn from the South African context of education. In doing so, the paper also explores the various conceptions, methods and theories of educational policy and policy analysis. This implies that the paper also outlines what constitutes educational policy and methods of policy analysis in a country. In this regard, the views of Steven Ball on policy as discourse and a text are employed to demonstrate how the social agentive nature of people as actors helps them make sense of texts through interpretations, contestations, constructing responses and dealing with contradictions and attempting representations through educational policy analysis. Jonathan Jansen's perspective of how curriculum policy reform sometimes reflects the struggle for the achievement of a broader political symbolism are also explored in the paper with examples drawn from the South African experiences of how the post-apartheid curriculum policy reforms were used to mark a paradigm shift or transition from apartheid education policy to the post-apartheid educational curriculum. In this sense the emphasis will be on how the conditions of social transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa made politicians of the new democratic South Africa analyse and use educational policy reform to herald this educational policy transformation in a sense that made educational policy reforms to function as a form of political symbolism. Trevor Gale's critical sociological perspective on policy analysis is also used as one of the lenses to show how the workings of society particularly the relations of what Wright Mills would call personal troubles and public issues influence policy analysis and reform.

Keywords: Curriculum, discourse, organizational politics, text, political symbolism

Introduction: Conceptualizations of educational policy and policy analysis

Ball (2009:15) observes that the largest problem many policy analysts face is the failure to conceptually define policy. This failure results in taking the meaning of policy for granted and leads to weaknesses in the analytical structure of research. For Ball, in order to avoid criticism, anyone embarking on analysis of policy should approach the task of selecting a working definition of policy seriously. He offers the following explanation of educational policy; it is not confined to the formal

relationships and processes of government, nor only to schools and teachers and legislation affecting them. For him, the broad definition of policy requires that we understand it in its political, social and economic contexts, because these aspects also require study for they also shape educational policy.

In Ball's view a positivist views of policy as product of governmental action is one that many find conceptually lacking and methodologically limited. Acknowledging this criticism a post-structural approach views policy analysis as extending beyond the work of official (state) institutions and involving both the material and discursive contexts in which policy is made (Ball, 2009). It is in this view that Ozga (2000:113) argues that policy analysis involves not only policy directives but negotiation, contestation or struggle between different groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy-making.

According to Lasswell (2011) the study of educational policy analysis is through policy sociology is a relatively new discipline that began in the early 1950s as a policy orientation in the social sciences. The field of policy analysis has generated ongoing discussion of its objectives and methods of inquiry. Nowadays policy is an object of analysis in a number of disciplines. Taylor (2007) cites three distinct academic traditions in which this is the case: political science, public administration and policy sociology. Ozga (2000:38) further distinguishes between policy analysis, policy science and implementation studies arguing that the problem with these terms, is that they are used interchangeably and without clear identification of points of difference. Gale (2001:380) notes three other names given to the field by the policy research and these are critical policy analysis, critical policy scholarship and the most widely accepted term, policy sociology, which is also used by Ball (2009).

Within and between these traditions there are different types and objectives of policy analysis (Zhou & Ferris, 1995; Young 2010). For example, policy analysis may seek to interpret the causes and effects of governmental actions with a specific focus on policy formation. This usually the initial stage of policy-making whereby policies are contested and shaped by various communities of actors involved in the reform. For Gordon, Lewis & Young (2007: 27), the popular distinction between analysis for policy and analysis of policy is important to understanding the different forms and objectives of policy research: analysis for policy advocacy, preoccupied with specific policy recommendations; information for policy, the main function of which is to revise actual policies; analysis of policy determination and effects, which examines the factors and processes shaping policies, i.e. the policy formation stage; analysis of policy content, which examines the values, assumptions, ideologies and discourses that underpin policies. Relevant to the above view of policy is Ball's (2000) conceptualization, which emphasizes a dual role of policy as text and as discourse.

An analysis of Educational policy as text and discourse

Perceiving policy as text, as Ball argues, rests upon the findings of a literary theory, which views policies as representations which are encoded in complex ways through 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 (Ball, 2009:16). The texts themselves are the products of multiple agendas and compromises. As Ball puts it, the texts are cannibalized products of multiple but circumscribed influences and agendas (p.16). For Ball, however, that claim does not imply a pluralist approach to policy, because alternative views or approaches are already excluded at the initial stages of policy formation. In addition, the problem of policy interpretation is complex because at all stages of the policy process we are confronted both with different interpretations" (Ball, 2000:17) and with interpretations of interpretations. This confusion leads to what Ball defines as a play in and plays of meanings. Ball (2000) claims that policy as text reflects the view of policy as a product of compromises between different agendas and interests. Moreover, policies are never complete; hence an analysis or researcher is always dealing with a particular piece of policy which should be considered in

connection with other policy texts and the history of responses to policy.

The theory of policy as discourse although insightful, prevents policy analysts from recognizing what Ozga (2005) calls a bigger picture, which comprises not only what policy-makers think and incorporate into their policy analysis agendas but also what they do not think or deliberately exclude from it. Taking these criticisms on board, Ball (2009: 21) suggests that policy is not only a text, but also a power relation, whereby power is exercised through a production of truth and knowledge, as discourses. In his understanding of policy as discourse Ball draws on post-structuralist theorist Foucault's popular view of discourses as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak Foucault (2002:49). Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intention (Foucault, 2002). Ball adds the definition that discourses are not only about what can be articulated and thought but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority (Ball, 2009:22). According to Foucault (2002), discourses are coupled with desire and power and are irreducible to language and to speech. The relationship between discourses and subjects who speak these discourses is described by Ball as follows: We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. We are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, and the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows. We are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies (Ball, 2009).

Expanding on Ball's view, Trowler (2008:132) emphasizes that discourse not only represents a social reality but also disguises its created nature by denying the alternatives. This is how Trowler elaborates this point: policy-makers, then, can and do constrain the way we think about education in general and specific education policies in particular, through the language in which they frame policies. The use of discursive repertoires drawn from business, marketing and finance is one of the ways by which this is accomplished (Singh & Manral, 2014). Franchising, credit accumulation, delivery of learning outcomes, the possession of skills and competences, skills audit and the rest can become part of everyday discourse and begin to structure the way people think about education. Perhaps most importantly, they work to exclude other possible ways of conceptualizing the nature of education (Trowler, 2000:133). According to Ball's approach, the effect of policy is primarily discursive as it changes and excludes the possibilities for thinking otherwise, thus limiting our responses to change (Ball, 2000:23). However, Foucault sees not only an imposition and domination in the work of a discourse, but also the possibility for resistance, because discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault, 2002:101).

Using the methods of policy sociology, Ball (2000) looks to analyse this and other discourses linking education and the economy; he identifies two themes as central to methods of policy analysis: the relationship of education policy to the needs of the state and the economy, and the relationship between education policy and social class. Ball (2009), notes that within the process of policy analysis, education is not regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education are often collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or side-lining of the social purposes of education (Ball, 2008; Bolander, 2012).

Popular modern discourses on policy analysis methods, Ball (2009) argues that do explain and construct the need for reform by invoking terms like globalization, international economic competition, and the needs of the knowledge economy, and then require certain types of policy responses from interpreters. These discourses not only prioritize the economic role of education, but privilege particular social goals and human qualities (Ball, 2009: 13). Alongside the discursive power of policy, Ball highlights the material ways policy works through technologies such as choice, competition, and performance management. After explaining and analysing these terms, Ball shows how they are analysed and deployed by the main multilateral forces in global education policy such as

the World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the European Union. His explanation details how each of these organizations wields its power, especially over poor countries, to promote deregulation and freedom for transnational markets. Ball also offers a history of English education policy and categorizes his analysis into four periods, across which he traces both changes and continuities in policy analysis and changes. Looking through the lens of social class, it is clear that historical and contemporary education policies are not as different as they might seem to the casual observer. Ball describes early education policy (1870-1944) in the UK as a response to the need to manage the new urban working classes and to accommodate the social and political aspirations of the new middle classes (Ball, 2009: 56).

Ball identified what he termed the classed approach to education policy, which yielded three tiers of public schools, motivated by a fear of the working class and an attempt to create a useful and docile workforce. For Ball, the next policy period (1944-1976) saw a preservation of the divisions within the public education system, although their justification shifted from income to intelligence. Comprehensive schools were created toward the end of this period, but even while vast differences remained in students' access to quality schools, critics of comprehensive education continued to battle against their existence. In the third policy period (1976-1997), the New Right worked to dismantle the welfare state and emphasize individual choice in a free market. For him, the final period (1997-2007) in the UK was defined by Blair's New Labour party and their creation of a competition state that largely emulated business practices (Bolander, 2012). Bolander's analysis shows how the different terms and strategies used over the course of 150 years of English education policy stem from a persistent social agenda based on the aspirations and fears of the middle classes. He also reveals the lasting efforts of policy-makers to deracialize policy and to address issues of race, class, or gender-based inequities only when they reach crisis levels.

An analysis of educational policy as a form of political symbolism

The aforementioned reflects the situation in the South African context of education where the advent of national democratic period in 1994 made the Government of National Unity to issue several curriculum-related policy reforms intended to democratize education and eliminate inequalities in the post-apartheid education system. In this case Ball (2009) concurs with Jansen's (2002) views that education policy functions as a form of political symbolism or as what Ogwuche and Ene (2014) would call a product of organizational politics. For example, the first attempt at curriculum analysis and reform in post-apartheid South Africa was to heal the polarized political landscape (Singh & Manral 2014) by purging the apartheid curriculum (school syllabuses) of racially offensive and outdated content (Jansen, 2007), while the second introduced continuous assessment into schools (Lucien, Young Lambert, 2008). However, the most comprehensive of the curriculum policy reforms in the South African education system have been labelled Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) and this has been an approach to education which underpinned the new Curriculum 2005. According to Jansen (2002) while the anticipated positive effects of the new curriculum have been widely heralded, there has been little criticism of these proposals given the social and educational context of South African schools.

The political and implementation intends and purposes of the OBE curriculum policy are systematically analysed and assessed in the subsequent section of this paper. It is perhaps important to start by noting Jansen's (2002) critique that the origins and anticipated trajectory of OBE or this curriculum reform was primarily a political response to apartheid schooling, rather than one which was concerned with the modalities of change at the classroom level. Jansen (2002:2) maintains that it was with great political fanfare, culminating in the release of 2005 multi-coloured balloons, when the Minister of Education launched Curriculum 2005 in Cape Town on 24 March 1997. In the run up to this event, schools and their allies had been repeatedly warned by the National Department of Education that January 1998 was an absolutely non-negotiable date for the implementation of what

was to become known as OBE. Within months, an explosion of curriculum policy activity thundered across South Africa as committees of departmental officials, curriculum developers, subject specialists, teachers, lecturers, trade union and business representatives and a good representation of foreign observers from Scotland and Australia attempted to analyse and translate OBE into workable units of information for implementation or teaching and learning which would be ready for first phase implementation in 1998. At first glance, there appeared to be sound reasons for a curriculum policy modelled on OBE as the curriculum analysis showed as if outcomes would displace an emphasis on content coverage (Jansen, 2002; Young 2010).

Given that outcomes make explicit what learners should attend to; direct assessment towards specified goals; signal what is worth learning in a content-heavy curriculum and that outcomes are a measure of accountability in terms of means of evaluating the quality and impact of teaching in a specific school, these universal claims were associated with OBE in several first-world countries and thus underpinned the analysis and implementation of the educational policy in the South African education system (Jansen, 2007). Several problems were eventually noted after the curriculum policy (OBE) was analysed in relation to their success stories or otherwise in other countries. Among these were issues of whether or not the set outcomes really deliver what they purport and how these outcomes play out in a poorly resourced school context. Other methods used to analyse this curriculum included whether an outcomes based education could survive the learners' psychological roots in behaviourism; whether outcomes in different teaching and learning contexts mean the same thing, that is, whether outcomes specified for education are equivalent to those identified for training (Jansen, 2002). These were some of the questions addressed in the comprehensive policy analysis of OBE using South African schools and the experiences of other countries as reference points.

For Ball (2008) good policy analysis and methods will raise all students' achievement by focusing attention on standards and failing schools, typically in inner-city areas. This textual or discourse approach tends to interpret, construct and address students' lack of academic achievement as a social problem of community and family inadequacies rather than an economic problem of structural inequality (Ball, 2009:153). He finds that even as people avoid direct discussion of race and social class variations in educational experiences and outcomes, they blame families and cultures for academic failure. He thus traces policy discourses around parenting, meritocracy and new models of schools, including academies, trust schools, and privatization, which aim to intervene through a deracialized model of entrepreneurship and competition as has happened recently in the South African education context with the political abolition of the dichotomy of Model C and Township schools.

Analyzing educational policy through a critical policy sociology

Influenced by post-structuralist theorist Foucault, Gale (2001) adopts a critical stance in examining policy analysis arguing that critical education policy analysis methods of historiography, archaeology and genealogy should be adopted to ensure a critical policy analysis processes. Historiography as viewed by Gale (2001) refers to both the study of the methodology of the historians and the development of history as a discipline, and also to a body of historical work on a particular subject, which in this case is educational policy analysed from a critical policy sociology. The historiography of educational policy thus covers how historians have studied that topic using particular sources, techniques, and theoretical approaches (Gale, 2001). For Gale, drawing on Foucault, what emerges from his analysis of educational policy analysis through critical policy sociology is not only a product of historiography but also an archaeological and genealogical view of policy analysis.

For Gale (2000), the interests of critical policy historiography, particularly policy archaeology in the subject of educational policy methods and analysis on the one hand, are in establishing why some items on the policy agenda (and not others?); why some policy actors involved in the production of policy (and not others?); and what are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved in methods and processes of policy analysis? (Gale 2001: 13). Whereas policy genealogy is

not convinced by analyses of policy production as explained by bounded rationality (Simon 2000) or incrementalism as achieved through partisan mutual adjustment (Lindblom 2009). It thus asks questions on how policies change over time, and also seeks to determine how the rationality and consensus of policy production might be problematized as well as how temporary alliances are formed and reformed around conflicting interests in policy production and analyses processes (Gale, 2001). The above interests, particularly those of both policy archaeology and genealogy, involve discerning the nature of social actors' engagement with policy (Gale 2000: 9) and, in this essay, are explored through analyzing the production of South African education policy during the period from 1994 to 2010.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a variety of matters of policy conceptualizations, analysis methods by making references to aspects of educational policy literature not only in South Africa but internationally though the OBE Educational or curriculum policy was used as the centre of examples. It has also drawn on matters about the politics of the policy analysis process with Jansen's views on how policy analysis can be used as a tool to settle political scores in a country (policy for political symbolism) or for social power to discipline and punish (Foucault, 2001) as well as a form of text and discourse. The discussion has revealed that theoretically, critical policy analysis would be well served by explanations of policy and the policy process that concern themselves with the who and how of policy production. As mentioned above, these aspects are not separate efforts but necessarily go hand-in-hand. Such explanations also require a less rigid account of policy analysis contexts and their structural relations. Seen in this view, educational policy analysis and production for countries like South Africa and the rest of Africa and Latin America should not just be made by actors differentially located within western democracies but should be co-analysed and produced by policyactors with the contextual differences in mind. As argued by Gale, this ensures that opportunities are fostered for policy actors to focus on a wider spectrum of policy communities; for policy conversations across cultural and contextual boundaries, directed at collective commitments and for pursuing creative possibilities.

Recommendations

Given that the paper has identified a number of strategies employed by policy actors in the review, analysis and production of an educational policy, the following recommendations are made; While the premise that educational policy is supposed to be read as if spoken with a single voice (Gale, 2000) a profound rational debate and consensus amongst policy analysts and or producers needs to be cogently understood as the product of struggle and conflict. Informed by the observations in this paper about the contentious issues surrounding policy analysis and review, it is recommended that perhaps critical policy analysis would be well served by explanations or debates of policy analysis methods and processes that concern themselves with the *who* and *how* of policy production since these aspects are not separate endeavours by virtue of their going hand-in-glove. Such discourses also require a less rigid account of policy contexts and their structural relations. This calls for what Yeatman (2012) calls policy activism so that it (educational policy) is not only produced and reproduced by actors variously located within western democracies in a theoretical sense. Such engagement by policy actors should also be acknowledged and enhanced as an expression of a radical democracy as argued by Lummis (2008).

In the policy analysis discourse, an account of policy making, the intention should thus be to establish the conditions for new conversations especially genuine expressions of interest, understanding and aspirations and for new actions and as Gale (2000) notes, this requires proactive engagements with local and global constraints and opportunities; their novelty to a nation needs to be drawn as much from *whom* involved and *how*, as from appreciation for new times. What should be envisaged, then, are opportunities for policy actors: to focus on a wider sense of policy communities; for policy conversations across cultural and contextual boundaries, directed at collective commitments (rather

than consensus); and for pursuing creative possibilities (Gale, 2000). This should be made a constant and on-going task for all stake holders involved in educational policy analysis and reforms. Finally, the relations between policy actors and the strategies they employ to review, analyse and produce policy need to be honest, free, and fair and to interrogate all relevant facets of the process.

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