Doing what we’re told, or telling them what we’re doing:  
A practitioner’s view of schools as policy makers

NESS GOODWIN, Abbotsleigh School

Overview

Australian education is in a period of substantial change. The rapidity and scope of change have been apparent since the end of the Second World War and show few signs of easing. During this period, schools have undergone massive changes and have been continuously redefining themselves in response to social, economic and political factors. Some of these factors include: the rise of mass secondary schooling; the growth in the number and diversity of schools; the state of the Australian economy; the increasingly pluralist nature of Australian society; and the effects of globalisation. These factors, among many others, have contributed to the reshaping of Australian schools.

One particular influence has been constant, and is steadily increasing. This is the influence of government policy. The period from the Second World War to the present day has been remarkable for increasing government involvement in school education. Such increasing involvement is particularly noticeable with regard to the Federal Government, although State Governments have also become more active in articulating structures and frameworks within which schools operate. Indeed, it is hard now to conceive of a Federal Government like the Menzies government, which for years refused to be involved in school education. It was only after extensive lobbying that in 1963 the Menzies government provided direct grants to schools for the provision of science laboratories, and soon after, libraries. Since then, the Federal Government has been involved in the provision not only of financial support for schools but also in the framing of policies which shape the direction and nature of school education. Let me give you an idea of the activity of the Federal Government in the field of school education over the past few years:

1987 National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools

1989 Hobart Declaration
   Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling
   National Curriculum
   Annual National Report on Schooling

1994 National Equity Program for Schools
   National Priority Funding Program
   Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program
   Key Competencies Program

This gives a sample only of some of the Federal initiatives in relation to school education!

Given the detail and complexity of government policies relating to school education, it would appear that all schools, irrespective of sector, are being caught within a web of

government planning which may curtail the independence of all schools to set their own directions. Or are they? Yes there is a complex web of government legislation and policies surrounding schools, much of it applying to both state and non-state schools. But to what extent are schools constrained in their operation by this policy web? To what extent are they being managed by government policy? To what extent can they set their own directions? To what extent are schools the passive recipients of policy?

I have only partial answers to some of these questions, certainly no definitive answers to any of them. But from the outset, I will say that some schools see themselves as powerful decision-makers. Some schools see themselves to be at the cutting edge of policy. For some schools, there is a real sense that although they are managed by federal and state government policies, the schools themselves manage back. The experience of these schools suggests that policy-making is not a one-way process, where policy is an external and often unwanted thing done to schools. Instead, some schools see themselves as forming and driving systemic policy.

This perception of schools as powerful agents in the policy-making process is something new. This notion does not appear in the literature. But it exists in the experience of practitioners. And so I find this a most exciting development in our conceptualisation of schools and the power that school practitioners can and do exercise.

And now some caveats:

- In this paper, I am speaking about Queensland state secondary schools, with occasional references to some Queensland non-state schools. I make no generalisations to apply to other systems, states or countries, though you may be able to draw some inferences from my research which will apply to your situation.

- A note about terminology here. I use the terms 'state' and 'non-state' for the sake of simplicity. The terms 'independent' and 'private' carry with them certain loaded connotations. I borrow the terms 'state' and 'non-state' from the Queensland Department of Education which has an Office of Non-State Schooling.

- The time frame for my research was 1990-1995, a period of major restructure under the Goss government. There have been further restructures of the Queensland Department of Education since then, but the five years of my study represent a period of fundamental change not just for the Department of Education, but also for the entire Public Sector. The changes were due, in part, to the findings of the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the need to strengthen the integrity with which government business was handled (Goss 1992, i). The changes which occurred were profound, and included:

  a) move to school-level decision-making, planning and evaluation;
  b) abolition of the Inspectorate;
  c) introduction of corporate managerialism at a systemic and school level
     - strategic planning
     - program management
     - performance indicators
     - openness, efficiency and accountability
     - maximum outputs
There is nothing remarkable about these changes: such changes or similar changes have occurred in many other places and in many other systems.

My research involved the analysis of official documents and archival material. In addition I conducted detailed interviews with 25 people in umbrella organisations (for example, Central Office, Regional Offices, non-state school organisations). I also gathered data in ten secondary schools (five state and five non-state) in south-east Queensland, interviewing 50 people in these schools using semi-structured interviews each of about 30–45 minutes.

**Theoretical framework**

Because my research required me to look at what governments were doing and how power operates, one of my tasks was to ground my research in a theoretical base which would help me to understand and explain how governments work and how power operates between an organisation and its members. In addition, I needed a theoretical base which would help me to understand the policy-making process.

I found the work of Michel Foucault, a French post-structuralist, particularly useful. I shall give only a brief outline of some of his ideas, as I have reported more fully on my theoretical approach elsewhere (see Goodwin 1996a, 1996b & 1996c). Three of his concepts have informed my research: governmentality, the Panopticon, and the articulation of power as both a disciplinary and creative force.

The first of these, governmentality, stems from the notion of government, though it is not limited in its application only to governments. The management and administration of a population via government policies have become key features of modern life. Governments aim to channel the activities of the population towards goals that have been planned by government:

> government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health etc. (Foucault 1991, p.100).

It must be stressed that governmentality is not conceptualised as a negative feature of modern society. Indeed, the management of a population towards planned outcomes can be seen as a highly positive element in society. But it does require management: it entails having data about the population and acting on that data in accordance with set plans.

One of the ways in which governments manage the population is through policies. Policies are statements of the intent to require certain behaviours and/or attitudes on the part of members of the society. Through policies, governments signal their intent to produce certain behaviours or outcomes which will benefit the population. If we return to education, in some instances, it is possible to follow a paper trail from the Cabinet to the classroom, a paper trail which outlines the government’s intention to manage the activities of the population in particular ways. Anti-discrimination legislation, for example, can be traced from Cabinet, through the Central Office policy-making process, into schools and finally, perhaps, in a class Code of Conduct which is pinned on the wall and discussed with students from time to time. The aim of government, and then of schools and teachers, is to require students to behave in particular ways to each other.

In addition to the management of a population, the notion of governmentality carries with it the notion of surveillance. For the process of governmentality to occur, the process of surveillance must also occur. That is, for a government to manage a population, it must also
be able to observe its population, to gather data, to scrutinise the population so that further management can occur. There is an endless loop of management and surveillance.

Therefore, the notion of governmentality can usefully be supplemented with the notion of the Panopticon. The Panopticon was Jeremy Bentham's design for a prison. It comprises a circular building surrounding a central tower. The building is partitioned into cells. In each cell, a window faces the outside wall to let in light. Another window faces towards the central tower from where the supervisor can see into every cell. The Panopticon

reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light, to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap (Foucault 1979, p. 200).

More important than surveillance by the supervisor in the central tower is the development of self-surveillance of the prisoners themselves. Because they know they can be watched at any time, the prisoners control their behaviour in accordance with expected norms. There will come a time when this self-monitoring of behaviour becomes internalised; that is, expected behaviour will become automatic. Although Bentham's design for a prison was intended to be taken literally, the Panopticon can be interpreted as a powerful metaphor for control by scrutiny, and for the internalisation of control mechanisms.

The Panoptic quality of policy is clear. The members of the Department of Education are effectively managed through policies. These policies state their purpose and the desired outcomes and they require self-surveillance by Departmental members for their operation. School planning and monitoring procedures, both of which are open procedures requiring community input, are Departmental policies requiring schools to operate in particular ways. And most important, these new processes require the members of schools to monitor their own behaviour: to judge and record how well their school has performed in relation to systemic policies. I make no judgment about how effective this process is, but certainly the intent of the Department to manage the behaviour of its members and the administration of its schools is clear.

Finally, I use Foucault's notion of power. His notion of the Panopticon undoubtedly acknowledges the disciplinary nature of power. He also, however, describes power as a positive rather than a negative force. In his conception, power is not possessed by a dominant agent, but is distributed through complex social networks:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power (Foucault 1980, p. 98).

While the disciplinary power of managerial intentions of governments may be exerted on schools through legislation and policies, the people in schools are able to exert creative power to enact, reframe, selectively implement policies and/or to create their own way of doing things.
Policy

The literature of educational policy has, until recently, been dominated by functionalist or rationalist perspectives which take as given an objective social world. Gordon et al. (1993) outline the rationalist approach as a series of neat steps from problem formulation to evaluation. It is a model we are all familiar with: a group of policy-makers articulate a problem, develop policy to overcome the problem, pass the policy down the line to the policy-implementers. When enough time has elapsed, the policy-makers determine how effective the policy has been in eradicating the problem. There may or may not be consultation with the policy-implementers at any stage of this linear progression.

The narrowness of this view of policy-making has been contested by a number of writers. Particularly influential have been Ball (1990, 1993), Bowe et al. (1992), Rizvi and Kemmis (1987). While their approaches differ in detail, in general they adopt a dynamic model of policy, rejecting top-down or centre-periphery models of the policy process. Policy is not made then done, but is actively constructed in every arena, and may be quite differently interpreted in every arena. Although the written texts of policy may not change over time, their interpretation, their implementation and hence their outcomes will be constantly shifting. Ball is particularly illuminating on this issue. He argues that policy texts are rarely the work of one author, and are subject to the micropolitics of legislative formulation and/or interest group articulation. Furthermore, the meanings of policies shift according to the arena in which they are located: representations change, key interpreters change, Ministers of Education change. And we know that in schools themselves, policies may not even be read except by administrators, and the policy intentions may be undermined or subverted by individual teachers, either consciously or unconsciously. The life of a policy is a precarious one. It does not follow a simple single trajectory as the rationalist–functionalist approach would have us believe.

The role of schools in both the traditional functionalist approach and the more recent dynamic approach is largely cast as minimal. The role of the individual schools in the functionalist frame is to receive policy then perform it. A more productive role for schools is allowed in the dynamic approach in that it is acknowledged that schools are able to interpret and often resist enunciated policies.

But I want to go further than either of these approaches. I have already argued that the notion of governmentality is useful in characterising the nature of policy. The lives of individuals, of groups and of organisations can be shaped by policies. Not only can the lives of people be shaped by policies, but the same policies can be used as a means of surveillance to ensure that the ends of governments are being met. The teachers and administrators in my study told me repeatedly of how they had responded to policy initiatives: of committees that had been formed, practices which had changed, beliefs which had altered. Government policies do impact on schools.

What I have just outlined: management and surveillance by policy would suggest that there is an endless circularity of power with little scope for individuals or for individual schools to act in opposition to policies. But neither governmentality, which relates to the management of a population, nor the Panopticon, which relates to the surveillance of a population, is complete. Deviation, subversion and resistance do occur, as do creativity and productivity on the part of individuals and individual schools.
The experience of schools

Let me now tell you some of the stories of school practitioners. Some administrators from both state and non-state schools expressed the view that they were not the followers of policy but the generators of policy. That is, school practitioners do not necessarily see themselves to be occupying a passive role in the policy-making process. The perceptions of several school participants in this study suggest that schools have a far more active and creative role in the policy-making process than the literature suggests.

The scope of my study did not enable me to explore in detail the manner in which the role of schools as policy-makers functions. But I think it is significant that administrators from different schools unconnected with each other perceive themselves as policy-makers. Certainly, their perceptions are worthy of further research and analysis.

The state school principals whom I interviewed expressed the view that schools are dynamic organisations constantly meeting new situations, responding to conflicting demands, and shaping and reshaping themselves. In this sort of endlessly fluid movement of needs, demands, personalities and situations, the principals saw their schools as the generators of policies, not the mere recipients of policies. One principal reported that in his school (where he had been principal for eight years), he had to develop policies and practices to manage students with physical disabilities, learning difficulties, students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds, all without recourse to centrally-developed policies. The school had developed its own ways of dealing with bullying and harassment before being required by the Department of Education to develop behaviour management plans. In short, the school had been constantly developing policies and practices that had not been formalised and published at a central level until several years after the school had developed its own policies.

Some state school principals perceived that schools are driving the Department of Education in this way. Schools are the sites where many of the academic, social and emotional needs of students are expressed. These needs are met at a personal level as teachers and students interact on a daily basis. By working through difficulties and arriving at solutions or experiencing failures, teachers learn how to do things and develop common practices to deal with local issues. This practical knowledge and expertise that teachers have developed may precede and even inform the development of systemic policies. There is a real sense in which the local precedes the global. In some instances, policy-makers in Central Office may not even be aware of certain problems until the needs of students have been articulated and managed in schools through locally-developed policies and practices. As one principal wryly commented to me, ‘We tell them what we’ve done when we’ve done it and made it work. Then they borrow it and call it their own’.

This view of local policy generation reinforces the very human side of policy development and implementation. Policy is closely allied to perceptions and behaviour. Policy develops to try to ensure that certain things relating to human behaviour do or don’t happen. It is crucial to remember, however, that in lived experience, our behaviour and actions are only sometimes governed by policy. Let’s consider the ways that the teachers and administrators in this study describe their behaviour to overcome problems.

One school administrator commented that if she wanted to know how to do something or how to solve a problem, she didn’t read through policy documents. (This will come as no surprise to people in schools!) She simply telephoned colleagues in other schools to see how they had managed the problem. In other words, she used her human networks and practical experience to guide her actions, not policy statements.
It is easy to overlook how important local human experience can be in the development of policy. As I was reminded constantly by participants, teachers are great networkers. Teachers and administrators try to find out what other schools are doing. They use this knowledge to inform their own practice and develop their own policies. School policies tend to develop from the formalisation and regularisation of practice. Such policies in turn, may be formalised by the system itself. I have no evidence for this, other than anecdotal evidence. But a likely scenario seems to be that common problems are shared at, say, local Principals' meetings. Local management strategies, polices and practices are discussed. These may all be passed on to the next level, perhaps through a Regional representative present at the meeting; the issue may then be picked up at Central Office. From Central Office, a policy-making process may be set in train. But what is crucial is that the schools have been an integral part of the policy-making process. They are not just the recipients of policy.

Conclusion

The view of schools as policy-makers which I am putting forward demands a reconceptualisation of the relationship between the centre and periphery in policy development and suggests a far more complex web of action and interaction than the work of policy theorists has suggested to date. I have argued that school participants acknowledge that their schools are managed in accordance with government intent. Similarly, schools can be viewed as disciplined organisations whose members are constantly involved in the process of self-surveillance. This does not mean, however, that within these managed organisations individual people are incapable of developing their own creative power networks. One of Foucault's assertions is that power operates productively at every point in the social network. Although the actions and beliefs of school practitioners may be managed in accordance with government intent, school practitioners are able to act powerfully and productively in ways which may resist current policies and practices, or even create new policies and practices. In fact, schools can be seen as central participants in the policy-making process.

REFERENCES


