

Educational Policy Analysis Debates and New Learning Technologies in England

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INTRODUCTION

New education policies and reforms have always encouraged analysts to scrutinise their effects and implications on education and training provisions. However, there has never been an agreement among different “factions” of analysts on which policy analysis framework(s) should be applied. The primary purpose of this article is to analyse educational policy in conjunction with a strategy for new technologies in education in England and draw some lesson for a wider context. To this end the process of the first major new technology policy on Further Education (FE), “Networking Lifelong Learning: An Information and Learning Technology Development Strategy for FE” (ILTSFE), Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) (1999a) has been examined.

To put the discussion in context, a synopsis of the major debates on educational policy analysis, particularly between the Pluralists and the Marxists are assessed. The main perspectives of educational policy analysis are explored to substantiate an argument that multiple perspectives should be applied in education policy analysis. A “policy spiral” model of education/new technologies is proposed as an alternative to the “policy cycle” framework, introduced by Ball (1990).

BACKGROUND

Governments around the world have acknowledged the necessity to plan strategically to exploit the social, economic and personal benefits of new technologies within a context of global competitiveness and continuous change. Selwyn (2011, p. 55) observes that following the publication of the Clinton-Gore administration’s National Information Infrastructure in 1993, governments across the globe passed legislation to augment technological resources – hardware, software, network

and training support. The UK National Grid for Learning, German Schulen ans Netz, and the Singaporean ICT Masterplan are examples of early policies drives. He summarises:

...[C]ountries such as the UK and US saw the launch and re-launch of often indistinguishable national educational technology policies and local initiatives throughout 1980s... [From the mid 1990s] onwards the field of educational technology [...] has attracted the sustained attention of policy-makers, figuring ever more prominently in the education policy agendas of countries around the world.

Selwyn (2011) concludes that now nearly every country in the world has made and implemented an educational technology policy.

The last UK Labour Government took various separate policy initiatives such as ILTSFE on new technology in education, particularly FE. From around year 2005, the Government attempted to coordinate its policy by linking different education, ICT and social reform policies to improve educational access, quality and widen participation to those social groups traditionally excluded from learning. The Government invested hugely in these initiatives. The current analysis concentrates on ILTSFE for its historical significance.

Debates on Educational Policy Analysis

Educational reforms have provided educational researchers with the opportunity to study changes and examine theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to policy research. These studies debate the educational policy analysis perspectives held by the Pluralists and the Marxists who have particularly differing approaches to the role of the State in education policy and its reforms (Ranson, 1995). The Pluralists view is

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referred to as a “state-centred” explanation, whereas the Marxists’ stand is termed a “state-controlled” explanation (Lall *et al.*, 2012).

The Pluralist education policy perspective was dominant throughout the post-war period (1955-75). The Pluralists assert that power is distributed between centres of decision-making and that each centre enjoys significant autonomy and resources; therefore, can compete equally. This view holds that the State policies are highly influenced by voters, pressure groups and the consensual value system, which limit the scope of State actions.

The Pluralist framework’s inability to account for the ever increasing complexities of continued reforms and the intensification of the State intervention led to severe attacks from the neo-Marxists such as Ozga (1987). The neo-Marxists argued that the Pluralist perspective overlooked the role of State power in policy formulation and execution. The neo-Marxists proposed the replacement of pluralism by a more state-centred and historically grounded approach. This perspective stresses the strategic role of the State in running the education sector, yet recognises that pressure groups and the teaching force can oblige the State to adjust education policies.

Responding to the neo-Marxists’ attacks Ball (1990) launched a Weberian-neo-Pluralist perspective attempting to move beyond the traditional Pluralist tendency of using commentary and critique of micro ethnographies of policy implementation. The new approach also tries to overcome simplicities of the classical Marxist perspective, which analyses education policy on the assumption that the policy process is controlled top-down in a linear fashion and that policies are implemented “passively.”

Bowe *et al.* (1992) further developed the Weberian-neo-Pluralism, into policy analysis. This approach is based on a model called the policy cycle. It was originally contended that policy should be analysed in three contexts: the context of influence (where interest groups struggle over construction of a policy discourse); the context of policy text production (where texts represent policies, though such texts may be inconsistent and contradictory) and the context of practice (where policy is subject to reinterpretation) (Bowe *et al.*, 1992). Accepting criticisms, Ball (1994) added two more contexts: the context of outcomes (the impact of policies on existing social inequalities) and

the context of political strategy (identifying political activities which may address such inequalities).

Lall *et al.* (2012) have continued elucidating and expanding the application of the policy cycle model outside schools covering key policies in citizenship, youth work, widening participation in higher education, inclusive education and undergraduate medical education. The key concern at the heart of the model is the extent to which the state (policymakers) and other policy actors such as implementers can determine the policy process and contents, an issue which is highly contested.

The State and “Non-State” Powers

Both the Pluralist and the Marxist approaches have problematic assumptions. Based on American studies among agencies with similar status, the Pluralist model makes an assumption that organisations which compete in the policy making and implementation process have equal bargaining powers. This inaccurate assumption leads to another erroneous supposition that all actors can renegotiate their positions through astute politicking (Ranson, 1995). But the State seems to have more powers and resources than most actors in the policy process and wins most arguments. For example, the current UK coalition government did not seem to encounter great difficulties in abolishing the previous Labour government’s education policies including strategies on new technologies in education. The model’s other assumption that merely sectional interests and the purposive pursuit of resources define policy actors’ orientations and autonomy, explains the reality inadequately. For instance, actors could collaborate rather than compete with each other.

The Pluralist approach described the social democratic education policy (1944-1973), but it failed to analyse characteristics of the policy process caused by economic crises since the 1970s. The approach underplays the ever-increasing State intervention in economic and social systems including education. Pluralists’ claim that educational policies are characterised by partnership may be true to some extent for the circumstances existed under the social democratic phase, which in fact, did not enjoy a uniform support and practice of partnership, due to oppositions to the policy (Taylor *et al.*, 1997).

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