

Research note

The evolution of policy making within a local education authority

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Contextualisation

This paper summarises the progress as at the summer of 2001 of the research for my thesis for the Ed D. The paper is divided into four main sections. First, the location of the research; secondly, identification of issues concerning methodology; thirdly, the preliminary presentation of some tentative results; and finally some initial conclusions from the research.

Introduction

The aim of this research is to examine the processes through which a local education authority (LEA) in England, mediates central government policies once these policies have been incorporated into primary or secondary legislation. Previous research into the policy process has identified the factors within central government (which may be termed macro-political) which contribute to one stage within policy development (e.g. Salter and Tapper, 1981, McPherson and Raab, 1988; Gewirtz and Ozga, 1990; Lawton, 1986, Ball, 1990, 1994; Ozga, 1987; Seldon, 1988; Fitz and Halpin, 1994; Whitty and Edwards, 1994), or within educational institutions, mainly schools (which may be termed micro-political), in the implementation of policies (e.g. Ball, 1987; Bowe, Ball with Gold, 1992; Blase, 1991; Blase and Anderson, 1995).

My research is centred at the LEA level, which may be termed the meso-political level, the level between central government and local institutions. Within this level I am interested in the micro-political interactions between elected Councillors, officers and stakeholders.

The focus of the research is an examination of the way in which a LEA implements central government policies by developing local Plans (as required

by government) in order to provide a local context to government priorities. I am employed as an education officer by the LEA in which the research is located. However, in my role within the LEA I have not been directly involved in the preparation of the Plans which have informed this research and which illustrate aspects of the policy process. The Plans that I am using as exemplars are the Education Development Plan, the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Action Plan, the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan and the Behaviour Support Plan. There are four main interrelated processes in the LEA's preparation of Plans: initial awareness raising; consultations involving partners and stakeholders; assessing the outcomes of consultations; and writing the Plan. However, it would be a misreading of the data to think that these were discrete activities or stages. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that there is a degree of fluidity about the whole process. My research touches on the continuing interest in the respective influences of structure and agency.

Methods

There have been two aspects of the LEA processes which have been of central interest to me. First, an assessment of the influence of individuals such as head teachers, governors, officers, parents and councillors on the production of LEA Plans. Secondly an examination of the impact of the values of the participants in the process. These two aspects led me to the use of semi-structured interviews to explore the views of individuals. This type of interview provided me with the opportunity of exploring in some detail the ideas, values and motives of the participants which would have not been so easy to examine through a questionnaire. Fifteen interviews have been completed involving councillors, education officers, head teachers, governors, parents and the teachers' professional associations; all the interviewees have contributed to the evolution of one or more of the Plans. I also have access to the minutes and notes of informal and formal meetings arising from the consultation process.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of my professional relationships with colleagues in the LEA and the knowledge of and links that I had established with head teachers, governors and the teachers' professional associations in the course of my work over a number of years. Individual officers gave me the names of parents who had contributed actively to the consultation process. Unfortunately I was unable to persuade a private sector provider of early years

services and a member of the Early Years and Childcare Partnership to give an interview or even complete an outline questionnaire.

It is important to state that I am not suggesting that these interviewees were representative of all groups involved in the policy process – they were selected with the hope that they would provide me with an insight into the interactions that take place during the evolution of policy within the LEA.

My position as an education officer in the LEA and as a researcher has highlighted a number of important issues relating to insider research. Although I have ready access to data I have recognised the importance of developing an independent perspective. Regular meetings with my supervisors have helped me to reflect on the development of this perspective. Even though I have used my detailed knowledge of the respective settings, I have sought to identify the vested interests that are operating – both my own and within the LEA. Through discussions with my colleagues on the Ed D programme and through reading I have become more aware of these vested interests and have begun to recognise their importance. I have used my networks and established relationships to collect data and have been helped to keep open lines of enquiry through my role which involves working across the LEA and not in one specialist area. In addition I have sought to obtain data from a range of sources in order to triangulate the interview data. I have also been concerned that the responses of some of the interviewees may have been influenced by my role as manager in the LEA. I was not aware, however, of any particular impediments arising from issues of hierarchy with councillors, colleagues, head teachers and the teachers' professional associations. I also felt that, because of their experience and the confidence they had in their own views, the parents I interviewed were not unduly influenced by my role in the LEA. This may have been helped as the interviews took place in their offices and homes. I would also suggest that issues of power and hierarchy may have been reduced because I have not been directly involved in the process of producing the Plans under discussion.

I did, however, find it difficult to resist the temptation to clarify LEA policy or LEA position during those interviews with people who expressed criticism of the LEA. I am expecting some conflicts of interest as I begin writing up my results and conclusions in view of the expectations placed upon me as an employee and those expectations relating to my role as a researcher. The ongoing tension in

practical terms of how to combine both an involvement and a detachment in the research process (Hammersley, 1993) is one with which I am still struggling.

Results

Data analysis is underway; there are indications that the production of Plans within the policy process is complex and fluid. The following are offered as tentative results. I have to say at this stage there is a degree of fuzziness about my interpretation of the data as I am in the early stages of structuring and conceptualising the data.

I have begun to use a framework proposed by Humes (1997), and have concluded that the policy process can be influenced by: ideology, people, issues, culture and organisation. Although these factors have been identified separately for the purpose of data analysis, they are all connected and as a consequence lead to the complexity associated with micropolitics.

i) Ideology:

- the values of councillors, officers, head teachers, governors and parents – the concerns for teaching staff, or for children;
- the pragmatism that was required in order to work through the tensions associated with the values which were in tension with each other.

ii) People:

- each of the interviewees has his or her own reference point in the process – they come with their own histories and perspectives;
- the backgrounds, including social class, gender and age, of councillors, officers, head teachers, governors and parents – they all play active roles within the education service as paid experts, gifted amateurs, or voluntary experts;
- the interrelationships between councillors and officers and the way in which a 'culture' is determined; there is a dynamic tension between what officers may wish to introduce and what councillors feel their

constituents might accept; the importance of informal contacts and meetings between councillors and officers;

- the interrelationships between councillors and head teachers, governors and parents e.g. councillors are content if their constituents are not complaining;
- the interrelationships between officers and head teachers, governors and parents e.g. the tension between the philosophy of officers and the interests of head teachers and governors.

iii) Issues:

- councillors and officers have legal responsibilities to carry out legislative and central government requirements – they do not have a free hand in what they wish to produce;
- the technical expertise of individual officers;
- the different emotional responses to the consultation process e.g. anxiety.

iv) Culture (in the main the values and the practicalities connected with the way in which activities were carried out and actions were taken):

- the exercise of power and influence, in particular by councillors and officers in setting the parameters for the Plans;
- the influence of public meetings e.g. 'grandstanding' – the way in which vocal minorities can dominate a meeting;
- what is and is not included on the agenda of these meetings.

v) Organisation:

- external influences such as the modernising agenda of local government where councillors are expected to set strategy and have less direct influence on operational matters; or the importance that head teachers give to the imperatives closest to hand e.g. their governing bodies or parents.

Initial analysis indicates two general findings. The first is that those who have the least influence on outcomes are those who are furthest away in time and space from the decision-making process and include the many parents and those who do not build up relationships with the decision makers.

Secondly, a key feature of the process is the way in which councillors and officers filter responses from consultations. Although all those involved in the process have said that they are motivated by a commitment to the best interests of children, decision-making owes much to the personal/political views of the key players and how they exercise power through individual contacts and through small groups.

Conclusions

Even though LEAs are presented with little room to manoeuvre by central government in determining policy, my study is beginning to indicate that there is some discretion which LEAs can exercise over contextualising these policies according to their local circumstances. However, the way in which this contextualisation is undertaken is often achieved in tentative and incremental steps and is dependent on the influence of individuals and the micropolitics of relationships. Having said this, such contextualisation is also subject to scrutiny from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) with the requirement that national expectations should be met.

Just as LEAs can interpret the texts of central government policies when they are passed for contextualising, so schools at institution level interpret the priorities of LEA Plans. There are already indications from my study that Plans, and by implication the policies on which they are based, are never finalised – they are in a state of evolution. First, they are open to interpretation as just described; secondly, as the environment changes the Plans need to be modified; and thirdly the Plans need to be updated as gaps become evident during implementation.

The research has highlighted the difficulties that there are in reaching generalisable conclusions based on a small-scale study in progress. I am continuing to examine the implications of the way in which power and influence have been exercised and to explore the political rather than merely technical

nature of the policy process within a LEA. There are signs that these factors have an influence on the way in which policies are interpreted, amended, subverted or distorted. In particular the complexities associated with the involvement of individuals in the policy process is likely to remain a fertile line of enquiry.

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