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Critical Policy Analysis: exploring contexts, texts and consequences

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Introduction

Little attention has been given to research methodology in the educational policy literature and, as Ball (1990, p. 9) has noted, the field of policy analysis has been dominated by commentary and critique rather than empirical research. It would appear that methodological questions about what 'data' are needed for analysis and how that material is collected have been less important in critical policy work than the theoretical frameworks which are used and the questions which are asked. There is, however, an extensive body of literature in the US dealing with policy 'evaluation' and 'implementation studies'. Much of this literature is managerialist, technicist and uncritical in approach, although a more critical literature has emerged in recent years (see, for example, Hawkesworth, 1988; Deleon, 1994). In the British context, Halpin and Troyna's (1994) edited collection has helped to redress the lack of concern for methodological issues within the field. In this paper I will review recent developments in methodology in policy analysis with particular emphasis on the influence of theories of discourse. Examples from recent Australian research will be used to illustrate the application of theories of discourse in education policy analysis, and the paper concludes by suggesting some requirements for education policy research which is both critical and political.

Ozga (1987) has termed the field of inquiry in education policy analysis 'policy sociology', which she describes as 'rooted in the social science tradition, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques' (p. 144), and this term has been adopted by many policy researchers. Grace (1987) refers to 'policy scholarship', while the American literature refers to the 'policy sciences'—a term first used by Lasswell in 1949 (Deleon, 1994, p. 77). Troyna (1994, pp. 81–82), however, rejects any dichotomy between policy sociology and other approaches using a social science perspective, basically because he believes that the former under-emphasises feminist and anti-racist work and fails to produce studies which have a 'strategic edge'. Troyna (1994) wishes to emphasise the linkages between critical policy analysis and critical social research, and argues that critical social research is interested not only in what is going on and why, but

is also concerned with doing something about it. Drawing on Harvey (1990), Troyna stresses that 'Critical social research includes an overt political struggle against oppressive social structures' (p. 72). Taking into account these concerns, my preferred term is 'critical policy analysis' (Prunty, 1985), a term which is also quite widely used in the field, particularly in Australia.

Leaving aside the question of terminology, Codd has argued that for some time 'the field of policy analysis has been fraught with argument over its purpose and methods' (1988, p. 235), and continues:

A widely accepted view, however, takes policy analysis to be a multi-disciplinary field that cuts across existing specialisations to employ whatever theoretical or methodological approach is most relevant to the issue or problem under investigation. (1988, p. 235)

Further, in a review of recent qualitative research in policy in the UK, Maguire and Ball (1994) comment that, in general, policy studies appear to be methodologically unsophisticated, with issues of language and meaning taken for granted. Elsewhere, writing of his aim to capture the 'messiness' and complexity of the policy-making process in his research on the 1988 Education Reform Act in Britain, Ball (1990) comments that, 'The changing processes of policy making in education over the past ten years have, to a great extent, outrun the development of relevant analysis and conceptualisation' (p. 7), and 'the conceptual tools seem blunt and irrelevant' (p. 8).

Gillian Fulcher (1989) made a similar point in relation to her research on integration policies in Victoria. Fulcher writes of her search for a theoretical model in the policy literature to use in her research, and her surprise in finding the inadequacy of most of that literature and that most of it conveyed 'no sense of the political struggles involved in developing and implementing policy' (1989, p. 3). As Fulcher (1989, p. 3) put it: 'The discrepancy between the literature and the political reality I saw, encouraged me to be sceptical of most of the conceptual and theoretical platforms the literature offered'.

There was, it seems, some sort of *impasse* in theory and methodology which was recognised by these writers. However, recent theoretical developments have been useful in highlighting the complexities of policymaking for which the traditional models seemed simplistic, and old conceptual tools seemed too blunt. They have offered 'a new set of tools to begin to try to explain things' (Ball, 1990, p. 18), with new possibilities being opened up through associated methodologies. This has led to a growing awareness of methodological issues in education policy work, with an increasing emphasis on issues to do with *meaning* and, related, a shift towards exploring the *effects* of policy rather than on policy intentions (Codd, 1988; Ball, 1990). We are also becoming much more conscious of questions of subjectivity (Jansen & Peshkin, 1992) and interpretation (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987), particularly in interview based studies (Scheurich, 1995); and of the standpoint of the researcher (Smith, 1987).

In general, the problematising of aspects of method in this way seems to be a result of post-modernism 'as a growing intellectual and cultural sensibility' that is influencing academic thought (Schram, 1993, p. 250), as well as, and often related, the impact of feminist approaches to policy analysis. Moving away from these broader developments, I now want to turn to consider the particular influence of theories of discourse on policy analysis and their value for critical policy work.

Theories of Discourse and Policy

While there are various strands within this work and a number of theorists have been influential in policy analysis, all draw to some extent on Foucault's theories of discourse, often complemented by neo-marxist cultural theorists like Gramsci (e.g. Fairclough, 1989; Kenway, 1990). While Thompson (1984) provides a detailed discussion of the various strands contributing to discourse theory, Codd (1988) provides a clear discussion of the theoretical underpinnings to his application of discourse theory to education policy analysis. My own approach has been influenced more indirectly by my work in feminist cultural studies and in feminist policy studies. By using the term 'theories of discourse' I want to adopt a broad—and pragmatic—approach to the interrelated developments in social theory, and reject any tight categorisation of theoretical positions as has been common in much of the recent academic literature.

Central in theories of discourse are language and meaning—aspects which, as has been mentioned, have often been taken for granted in policy analysis in the past. The major explanatory concept used in these theories is: *discourse*. This term was used by Foucault 'to designate the conjunction of power and knowledge' (Kenway, 1992, p. 128), while Meutenfeldt defines discourse as: 'the complex of ... notions, categories, ways of thinking and ways of communicating that constitutes a power-infused system of knowledge' (1992, p. 4). Meutenfeldt uses the concept in developing a sociological framework to examine how political processes and policy-making shape and are shaped by both social power relations and the power of the state. This approach is particularly useful for critical policy analysis because it can take account of policy making at all levels, allows for conceptualisation of the state, and highlights the *political* nature of policy making. In addition, it is a dynamic framework which emphasises *culture* as well as *practice*.

Even though policy is not explicitly mentioned in the extract which follows, it can be usefully conceptualised within this framework:

On one hand, the various projects of state institutions, party politics and social movements draw on the social categories, resources and meanings [*i.e. discourses*] that are made available and reproduced through the culture and practices of the wider society. On the other hand, those same political projects simultaneously impact upon the wider society: they shape social categories, position people within them, and mould the categories of citizenship through which people are brought into particular relationships with the state and politics. (Meutenfeldt, 1992, p. 2)

Policy, as an aspect of the various political projects of state institutions referred to by Meutenfeldt, is central in these dynamics.

Fairclough's (1989, 1992, 1993) focus on language as social practice also provides a useful theoretical base for critical policy analysis. Fairclough is interested specifically in the relationship between 'discursive practices, events and texts' on the one hand, and 'wider social and cultural structures, relationships and processes' on the other—in order to explore the linkages between discourse, ideology and power (Fairclough, 1993, p. 135). These linkages are clearly relevant to the exploration of policy documents within broader policy processes.

In my view, discourse theories have enhanced the scope of critical policy analysis in a number of ways. The most obvious influence is the increasing focus on policy documents as *texts*, but discourse theories can also be drawn on to explore policy-making processes within the broad discursive field within which policies are developed and implemented. In other words, they enable valuable fine-grained analyses to be under-

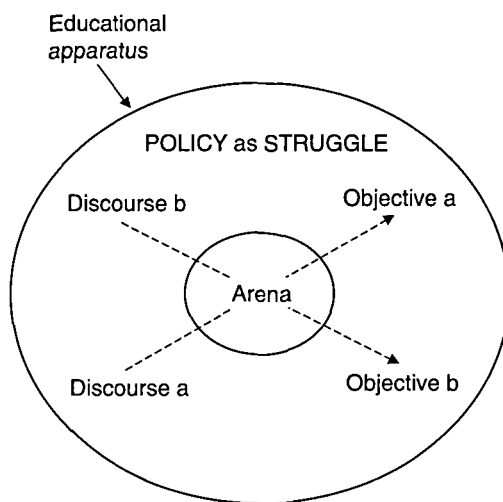


Figure 1. A political model of policy based in a theory of discourse.

Source: Fulcher, 1989, pp. 4, 6.

taken within a broader structural analysis. I have found them useful in my own ongoing work on equity, policy and the politics of change—particularly because of their emphasis on *culture*.

From a discourse theory perspective, *policy making* is viewed as an arena of struggle over meaning, or as ‘the politics of discourse’ (Yeatman, 1990). The emphasis is placed on policy *processes* and policy is seen as ‘struggle between contenders of competing objectives, where language—or more specifically, discourse—is used tactically’ (Fulcher, 1989, p. 7). For example, in her study of the development and implementation of integration policy in Victoria, Fulcher found that the ‘rights’ discourse articulated by parents of students with disabilities conflicted with the discourse of professionalism of the special educators. Struggles such as these are viewed as occurring at all levels and in all arenas of policy making—Fulcher identified policy arenas at six different levels in the Victorian education system, from School Council Subcommittees on Integration to the Regional Board—and are often reflected in the form of tensions and contradictions, or competing discourses, in the resulting policies themselves (Fulcher, 1989).

From this perspective, then, *policy texts* represent the outcome of political struggles over meaning. Codd elaborates on this point (1988):

... policy documents can be said to constitute the official discourse of the state (Codd, 1985). Thus policies produced by and for the state are obvious instances in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs that work to mask social conflict and foster commitment to the notion of universal public interest. In this way, policy documents produce real social effects through the production and maintenance of consent. (p. 237)

However, also central to theories of discourse is the idea that there is no single reading of policy texts. Rather, ‘for any text a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings’ (Codd, 1988, p. 239). Consequently, Codd suggests that: ‘Instead of searching for authorial intentions, perhaps the proper task of policy analysis is to examine the differing effects that documents have in the production of meaning by readers’

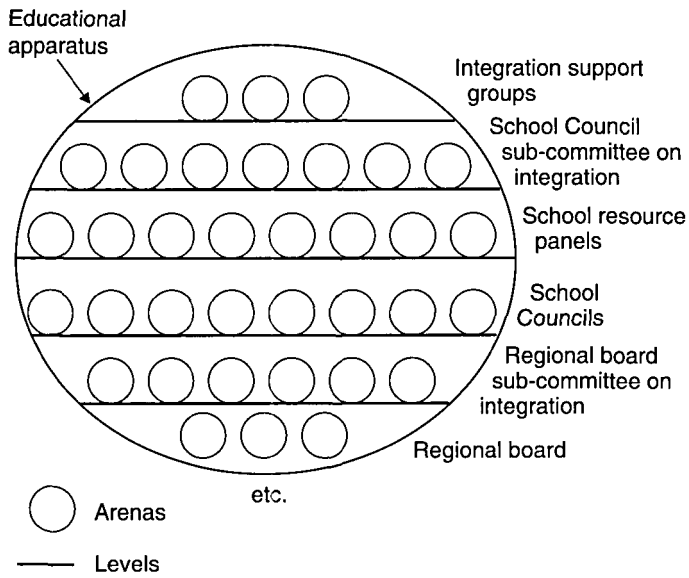


Figure 2. Some examples of policy levels and arenas in the Victorian educational apparatus.

Source: Fulcher, 1989, pp. 4, 6.

(p. 239). Through reinterpretation and recreation, policies may be seen to be: 'continuously constituted and reconstituted through discussion, activities and social relationships' (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1989, p. 15). Further, it is possible to conceptualise policy making as a continuous policy cycle of policy making and remaking in specific sites (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992; Ball, 1994). (See also Fulcher (1989) who has a similar view, although she does not use the term *policy cycle*.)

Associated with this theoretical approach is some sort of textual analysis, ideology critique or deconstruction to highlight the constitutive practices texts use. The approach is useful in highlighting values and teasing out competing discourses, both in policy development and policy implementation (to use the old dichotomy). Some fine grained analyses of the use of language in policy texts use a linguistic approach—exploring linguistic strategies used to position readers (Luke *et al.*, 1993), as well as key words used. However, McHoul (1984), in what seems to be one of the first applications of discourse analysis in relation to education policy, distances himself from what he refers to as 'a narrowly formalistic look at the "linguistics" of policy statements' (p. 1). He explains that policy texts 'constitute nodal points or networks of signifying practice generally; networks of discourse which constitute a field of power and knowledge ...' (pp. 1–2). His focus is on texts and textuality: on the 'conditions of possibility' of policy texts—how they come to be.

McHoul (1984) analysed Queensland Education Department's Equal Opportunities policy statement and associated documents produced by the conservative Bjelke-Peterson government in 1981; developed as a result of the availability of Commonwealth funding for programs for the education of girls (Lingard, Henry & Taylor, 1987). McHoul showed, using a discourse analytic approach, the contradictions within the policy documents, and how the policy text transformed, incorporated and neutralised feminist

discourses. Significantly, this discourse analysis was placed in a broader socio-historical context. As is emphasised by Codd (1988), whose application of discourse analysis to education policy work has been influential in Australia and New Zealand, such fine-grained analyses need to be placed in a broader context: 'Policy documents ... are ideological texts that have been constructed within a particular context. The task of deconstruction begins with the recognition of that context' (pp. 243–244). The following section, which briefly outlines some of the ways in which discourse theory can be used in critical policy analysis, begins with a consideration of the analysis of policy contexts.

Applications in Education Policy Analysis

Discourse theory can be used to explore particular policies in their historical context; tracing how policy 'problems' are constructed and defined and how particular issues get to be on the policy agenda. It is also useful in highlighting how policies come to be framed in certain ways—reflecting how economic, social, political and cultural contexts shape both the content and language of policy documents.

For example, there have been significant changes in how approaches to educational inequality have been framed and in key concepts which have been used in education policies (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987; Connell & White, 1989). Differences in terminology reflect the particular historical and cultural context, and have implications for the ways in which particular concepts are used and understood. The various concepts which are associated with equity issues are highly malleable—with terms and meanings changing over time and according to the political context: 'Concepts do not remain still for very long. They have wings, so to speak, and can be induced to fly from place to place. It is this context which defines their meaning' (Apple, 1993, p. 49). In Britain, though 'stronger' policy approaches which are directed at structural change have been termed 'anti-racist' and/or 'anti-sexist', 'equal opportunities' is the term which is used to cover the general policy field. In Australia, on the other hand, 'equity' and 'social justice' have come to be used as the 'umbrella' terms to refer to policies which aim to address inequalities in education—reflecting a move towards the notion of 'fairness', which places emphasis on participation as well as outcomes in addressing educational inequalities between social groups. Hence linguistic practices used—which operate at the level of metaphor and symbolism—are relevant for policy making and analysis (Schram, 1993). Policy discourse can be conceptualised as a kind of 'symbolic language' with specific terms such as 'equity' acting as 'condensation symbols' (Troyna, 1994) within the cultural context.

The significance of the *cultural context* for education policy making was highlighted in my research on equity and the Education Reform Act in Britain (Taylor, 1993). I explored the impact of the changing cultural and political context on the 'politics of discourse' relating to 'equal opportunities' policies in Britain and argued that:

The British experience shows the importance of the cultural, or 'common sense', level in influencing how popular prejudices are taken up and articulated in policies. The Conservatives were able to draw on the deep seated conservatism in British culture to marginalise anti-sexist and anti-racist education and to construct their new policy agenda. (Taylor, 1993, p. 38)

In addition, the conservative popular press were able to pick up and articulate discourses of racism in the community in orchestrating support for the government, and in the

process 'equal opportunities' became seen as a 'loony left' issue and discredited. (See Wallace, 1993, on the contribution of the mass media on education policy processes.)

In contrast, in my research with Miriam Henry, the emphasis was more on the impact of the changing *economic and political context* on the way equity issues have been framed, or reframed, in Australian education policy. Labor's approach to gender reform policy was to link together gender equity and economic rationalism in 'an uneasy alliance' (Henry & Taylor, 1993), as a result of Labor's shift towards economic rationalism in the mid to late 1980s. However, we argued that this approach to social justice builds on Australian traditions of reform in which elements of market needs and social reform are intertwined. We traced the impact of this contradictory policy context on the implementation of the *National Policy for the Education of Girls*. As a result of the competing discourses—with economic rationalist discourses dominating—the equity goals of the policy were distorted through a narrowing focus on vocational education and training.

As well as being useful in exploration of policy contexts then, discourse theory can be applied to policy implementation case studies. Given that contradictory contexts and competing interests are reflected in policies as competing discourses, policy effects are by no means certain or predictable. Discourse theories are useful for investigating how policies are *read* and *used* in context; in other words, for documenting the politics of discourse during policy implementation. This kind of focus will be illustrated in more detail in the next section.

Discourse theory can also be used to highlight the workings of the state in policy formulation. (See, for example, Ball's (1990) research on the development of the Education Reform Act, or Kenway's (1992) work on feminism and the state.) My own work on the state and social change (Henry & Taylor, 1993; Taylor, 1993) has been influenced by discourse theory via feminism. We have drawn on feminist accounts of the state which, in line with a focus on the politics of policy processes, emphasise the state as a set of dynamic, historically located and complex processes rather than, simply, a set of institutions. In Burton's words:

The state is not a thing; it does not exist as a single, monolithic entity. It is a complex of relationships, embodying a certain form of power operating through various institutional arrangements ... The state is a social-political process, the result at any given moment of struggles and demands. (1985, pp. 104–105)

The influence of theories of discourse have resulted in more critical awareness of methodological questions which had previously been taken for granted—particularly in relation to interpretation. In their policy case study of the Participation and Equity Program in Victorian Schools, Rizvi and Kemmis (1987) refer to a scene in *The Life of Brian* to illustrate the problem of interpretation:

In the film there is a moment when a spectator of the sermon on the mount relays the words of the distant Christ to others still further back in the crowd: 'blessed are the cheesemakers ...', he reports. The interpretation of interpretation causes problems of refraction as messages are relayed across distance, across time, levels of hierarchies, and locations. (p. 15)

These problems clearly have implications for policy-making processes. They also have implications for methodology in critical policy analysis itself as new questions are posed about the validity of ethnographic and other qualitative methodologies which are often used in policy work (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Silverman, 1993).

Questions have also been raised about the ideological nature of policy research

(Schram, 1993; Griffin, 1994), and we have come to see the ways in which our theoretical frameworks help to legitimate particular approaches to policy making. For example, Ball (1990), researching changes in education policy-making processes in Britain following the Education Reform Act, suggested that perhaps theoretical shifts have made the pluralist approach to policy making seem to be inadequate and ideological (pp. 12–13). In this context, research by Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) demonstrated that the notion of ‘partnership’ in Britain had been working in an ideological way—obscuring the bureaucratic control exerted on education policy making at the local level by central government officers.

There has also been a recent tendency to problematise how policy problems are constructed and how they are framed (see, for example, Beilharz, 1987; Huxley, 1989; Yeatman, 1990; Griffin, 1994). In this context, Schram (1993) shows how social welfare policy in contemporary post-industrial US maintains old distinctions and helps to recreate problems of the past—especially in relation to reproducing women’s poverty, and argues that policy helps to construct the reality it confronts. Scheurich (1994), on the other hand, advocates an emphasis in policy analysis on how problems get to be on the policy agenda, and gives this approach the new name of: *policy archaeology*.

Research on the New Post-Compulsory Education and Training Agenda

In this section of the paper I will discuss two examples from my research with Miriam Henry on the new post-compulsory education and training policies in Australia in which our work has been influenced by theories of discourse. Our on-going interest is on equity, policy and the politics of change.

Debates around the Post-Compulsory Education and Training Agenda

Our initial research project on the post-compulsory policies focused on the policy context and the debates around the new agenda (Taylor & Henry, 1994). In terms of the applications to policy analysis discussed in the previous section, the project attempted to link *text with context*. We traced the framing of the policy agenda—resulting from the involvement of the Commonwealth and all state governments, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the unions, and business and industry—and the way competing discourses were ‘stitched together’ in the new policies. We also traced the historical antecedents which led to this policy framework. For example, both the government’s and the ACTU’s agendas build on a mix of utilitarian and more progressive discourses in Australian education, the origins of which we traced and documented.

The various competing interests and discourses involved in policy formulation were explored through an analysis of the media debates in *The Australian* newspaper’s weekly ‘Higher Education Supplement’ through 1992—the year the policies were developed. The main debates were over the following issues: the distinction between education and training and the respective roles of the universities and TAFE colleges; competency based education and training; centralised policy control; and funding and resources. We argued that our analysis of debates revealed new alliances and divisions involving key players and sectors of the post-compulsory system, and highlighted: ‘... the stretched nature of this policy “umbrella”, sheltering as it does a fragile consensus, in turn sheltering a number of disparate and not necessarily compatible interests’ (Taylor & Henry, 1994, p. 117).

It was clear that there were underlying tensions within the new vocationalist discourses in the Finn, Carmichael and Mayer reports reflecting these disparate interests (for example, between exponents of liberal education and vocational training, or between fordist and post-fordist assumptions about the workplace), despite the use of key words such as 'pathways' and 'convergence'—which acted in a sense as linguistic markers glossing over the different perspectives of the key players. For example, 'the competencies debate' was complicated by the different strands of competencies involved: competency based training or education; vocational competencies as referred to in the Carmichael Report; and the key competencies as developed by the Mayer committee. The proponents of the new policies argued that the key competencies form the foundation for but are independent of the Australian Vocational Certificate (AVC) Training System—a crucial point, because in much of the education debate the various competency strands were conflated by those, such as the older more traditional universities, who opposed the new agenda.

We argued that the agenda was complex and ambiguous, operating in a multilayered policy field, and offering contradictory possibilities for young people. We suggested that, while limited reforms were possible, the very breadth and ambiguity of the policy agenda might very well exacerbate regressive ends.

Implementation of the Carmichael Report

Following the initial project, we were interested, then, in the impact of this contradictory and ambiguous agenda. In 1993, we commenced research in Queensland aimed at investigating which aspects of the new policies were being picked up 'on the ground' (Henry & Taylor, 1995). Here the focus of our research was on *text and consequences*.

We were interested in examining the broad claim for greater 'inclusiveness' as well as more 'targetted' notions of equity underlying the concern with questions of participation, equity and access for disadvantaged groups in the Carmichael Report and associated documentation. We looked in some detail at four of the projects funded as pilot studies for the introduction of the AVC Training System (referred to as AVC pilots), which in turn involved an examination of the processes surrounding the administration of the pilots. Given our theoretical interest in the dynamics and politics of policy processes, we wanted to explore the administrative and systemic context within which the pilots operated as well as 'on the ground' implementation issues; hence we also examined how equity matters were dealt with within the Commonwealth and state bureaucracies as well as within the projects themselves. Key players involved in initiating or implementing the pilots were interviewed and documentation relating to the pilots was examined. Additionally, we had access to the minutes of state steering committee meetings.

The documents revealed that there is no shortage of rhetoric or strategies for dealing with equity, and our study confirms that there is no shortage of subversive tactics 'on the ground' either. The research highlighted an important dynamic in the change process: the relationship between policy objectives and policy outcomes. The study indicated that slippages between rhetoric and practice were already apparent in the early implementation stages of these policies, and threatened to push the policy agenda in conservative directions. The mediating effects of a complex layering of policy processes, usefully captured by the notion of 'policy refraction' (Freeland, 1981), was notable in this case study. Strongly stated equity objectives at the Commonwealth level became progressively weakened in the ebb and flow of negotiation and in the face of local pressures along the 'policy chain': the perceived urgency of getting the agenda 'up and running'; the

constitution of a state steering committee without expertise in or commitment to equity implementation; the masculinist culture of the trades environment; the particular pressures facing schools; and so on. The study showed how the various levels—Commonwealth, state and local—were able to play off against each other in order to avoid responsibility for equity provision.

But slippage between objectives and outcomes is not simply a matter of a ‘gap’ between policy formulation (rhetoric) and implementation (reality). The notion of competing discourses is also relevant to this analysis. The case study showed how, in the politics of policy implementation, older and powerful meanings may emerge within the new vocationalist discourse. The pilot projects used keywords such as ‘pathways’, ‘equity’ and ‘convergence’ to legitimate fairly traditional versions of vocational education likely to maintain rather than address social divisions. Also embedded in the policies were other competing discourses of regulation and deregulation—the latter a reflection of the economic context which threatened to distort the long term goals of the policies.

We used the notion of ‘playing the agenda’ in relation to the dynamics of policy making at all levels—highlighting the politics of discourse where new concepts were used strategically to legitimate particular approaches and to attract funds from the ‘AVC bucket’ for projects which failed to come to grips with the new policies.

Conclusion: linking contexts, texts and consequences

In this concluding section, I will attempt to draw the threads of my argument together and suggest some criteria for approaching education policy research which is both critical and political. In the paper I have examined the influence of theories of discourse on policy analysis and their value for critical policy work. I have discussed a few examples of their application from my own recent research, though these examples are not offered in any way as ‘ideal models’. Rather than indicating a deliberate *move* to draw on discourse theory, the research has been more indirectly influenced by discourse theory through feminist cultural studies and feminist policy analysis.

I have argued that discourse theory has allowed us to address the complexity of education policy making through a focus on the ‘politics of discourse’. In my view, such an approach is able to contribute to a deeper understanding of how policy-making processes *work* at a fine-grained level. However, to be strategically and politically useful, it is important that such fine-grained analyses are located within a broader context, including an historical context. This seems to be a crucial feature of critical policy analysis, that is, the notion of ‘thinking relationally’—where theoretical frameworks are used to place cultural forms within broad patterns of social inequality and relations of domination (Carspecken & Apple, 1992, p. 512). Similarly, Agger (1992) usefully distinguishes between a critical (sociologically based) post-structuralism, where discursive strategies of policy texts are placed in broader context, and a post-structuralism drawn more from literary criticism which does not take account of the broader political context within which texts are generated.

There seems to be general agreement among most policy researchers that there is a need to take account of both ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels, and that critical work needs to place education policy making within its broad economic, social and historical context. But, rather than maintain the macro/micro dichotomy—or even a macro/meso/micro categorisation—I would want to emphasise the many layered nature of policy making and the importance of exploring the *linkages* between the various levels of the policy process with an emphasis on highlighting power relations. In other words, we need to

think about the three aspects included in my title: contexts, texts and consequences. Policy texts need to be analysed within their context and also in relation to their impact on policy arenas in the broadest sense.

There is probably a need too for more comparative work—as advocated by Dale (1994). I have been struck by the ways in which the political contexts within which we work frame our approaches to policy analysis. In Britain, as a result of changes brought about by the Education Reform Act and the marginalisation of sociology as a discipline, policy researchers have probably had fewer opportunities to be involved with policy development than in Australia. Labor governments in Australia have provided opportunities for direct involvement in central policy making at Commonwealth and state levels, and there are also opportunities through the unions, women's movement and other community groups to become involved in policy processes more indirectly. For example, our research on women and training has been used by activists within the unions to push the training reform agenda in progressive ways. As Finch (1984, p. 231) observes, 'one important implication of policy-oriented qualitative research is that it has the potential for engaging the researched as well as the researcher in evaluating the *status quo* and bringing about change'. Thus she reminds us of the need to be concerned about grass roots policy change as well as providing information 'upwards to remote "policy makers"' (p. 231).

In this paper I have avoided becoming involved in the 'state control versus policy cycle debate' (Slee, 1995) which has become artificially polarised and reified in the literature in a way which is not very useful. The so called 'debate' is a tangled web with a number of strands or dimensions caught up in the discussions. As well as the issue of the role of the state (Dale, 1992) versus localised players in specific sites (Fulcher, 1989; Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992; Ball, 1994) in the development and implementation of policy cycle, there are vestiges of old debates around pluralism/state control, policy making as linear/complex, and the degree to which an analysis is sufficiently strategic or not. There have also been vigorous debates in the literature around the use of post-structuralist approaches in theorising policy which are relevant to the present discussion. Criticisms have been made of the use of discourse theory in policy analysis for under-playing the constraints on policy making (Evans, Davies & Penny, 1994), and Hatcher and Troyna argue that the policy cycle approach 'distorts understandings of the policy process, especially in the relative powers which it assigns to the central apparatus of the state and to the schools' (1994, p. 156). Other writers (Henry, 1993) criticise post-structuralist approaches for their failure to ground fine grained analysis in a material or structural analysis. In this paper I have emphasised the importance of placing fine grained policy analyses in their broader context. In his recent work, which draws on critical theory and ethnography as well as post-structuralism, Ball (1994) makes it clear that he is not neglecting broader power issues, or indeed political questions relating to social justice. Further, he anticipates criticism of his use of what might be seen as incompatible theoretical perspectives, arguing that: 'The critical analyst must take risks, use imagination, but also be reflexive. The concern is with the task rather than with theoretical purism or conceptual niceties' (Ball, 1994, p. 2). This is the position which I have adopted in this paper though I too am aware of the possible problems of eclecticism.

Finally, I think that methodological issues have been side stepped for too long in education policy analysis. More attention should be given to questions of meaning and interpretation—as well as validity, reliability and subjectivity which I have only mentioned briefly. Such attention will strengthen policy research and hopefully produce critical analyses which will be useful in relation to the pursuit of social justice. What is

important is an underlying value commitment to social justice, and an analysis which is as rigorous as possible. And we need to remember, in line with the broader conceptualisation of policy as the politics of discourse which I have advocated, that policy research may be used not only by policy makers within the state, but by other interest groups, such as teachers. An understanding of policy processes as the 'politics of discourse' can be very useful to those involved in 'on the ground' struggles in the various arenas of education policy making.

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