

What is “policy”, a problem–solving definition or a process conceptualisation?

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Abstract

An investigation into the usage of the term “policy” suggests that the term is elusive owing to the very many ways it is used to refer to a highly diverse set of phenomena. This paper reviews conceptions explicated in education policy literature to provide conceptual insights into the meaning of the term and an understanding of the dynamics of the policy process. The traditional problem-solving definition views policy fundamentally as a thing, a guide and a document of some sort, containing a page or flips of pages indicating policy choices reached by policy makers and which policy implementers or actors are to follow in dealing with a recognised problem of concern, and is thus criticised for two main reasons. Firstly, the view is criticised for neglecting the socio-cultural dynamism of policy processes. Secondly, it is criticised for its implicit over-determinism. The process model pays attention to the social agency of the policy process and is thus criticised for not focusing on policy-making, but on understanding actor interactions within the process. Based on these explorations, and in gauging a working definition of policy, the paper adopts a theoretical eclecticism approach whereby education policy is conceptualised as neither the product of policy making nor a process, but both. Significantly, policy in this context is conceptualised as referring fundamentally to the exercise of power and the language that is used to legitimate the process.

Keywords: *traditional/rationalist foundation to policy, process conception, policy as “text and discourse”, theoretical eclecticism*

Introduction

An investigation into the everyday as well as scholarly usage of the word policy reveals that the term is elusive owing to the very many different ways that it is used to refer to a highly diverse set of phenomena. Illustrating the elusiveness of the term in our everyday usage, Harman (1984) for example explains that in a single day in many countries, one is likely to hear among other things, the Prime Minister announce changes in the nation’s foreign policy, a city mayor discussing an aspect of city traffic or parking policy, and a shop assistant explaining to a customer why particular goods cannot be returned or exchanged because of company policy. The same lack of precise meaning of policy can also be said to be true of “Education”, in which the term policy is used anonymously with notions such as “goals”, “plans” and “programmes”. As Ball (1994, p. 15) succinctly puts it, ‘the meaning of policy is often taken for granted and a theoretical and epistemological dry rot is built into the analytical structures constructed’, making it difficult to achieve a grounded conceptual understanding of the real meaning of the term.

While explanations about the lack of precise meaning alluded to above hold true for all kinds of policy, scholars have always attempted a formal definition of policy. This paper explores the meaning of the term from a review of definitions and/or conceptions offered in education policy literature. For the purpose of drawing conceptual leverage on the issue, the paper juxtaposes the traditional problem-solving definition of policy (Jennings, 1977; Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980; Harman, 1984; Dale, 1989) with the process model¹ (Bowe et al, 1992; Ball, 1994; Trowler, 1998; Ozga, 2000; Olssen et al, 2004). These two conceptualisations of policy undeniably are located within the broader theoretical perspectives of "modernism" and "postmodernism"² (Vidovich, 2001), and are intended to assist in gauging a working definition of the term which would in turn provide a basis for a conceptual understanding of the dynamics of policy processes and how policy and practice exist in dynamic and iterative relationship.

The traditional problem-solving definition of policy

What in the context of this paper is referred to as the problem-solving definition of policy relates to the conception of policy as an event and/or a guide, concerned fundamentally with the act of setting out solutions to problems. This view originates from the "state centred" approach and its inherent traditional and rationalist foundation of policy processes which focus on the locus of power (Dale, 1989; Smyth, 1994). It presumes that experts trained in proper analytical techniques can apply their expertise to the political marketplace, can discover and measure the impact of policy on citizen interests, can project policy consequences with some accuracy, and can affect the decisions of identifiable clients, who will use policy and its analyses to solve problems. The view is thus reminiscent of the optimistic view that reflects a positivist idealism of "objective world-view" waiting to be explored (Denscombe, 2002; Neuman, 2004; Gephart, 1999). It is driven as well by the 'stages' view of policy making in which one of the final stages is a timely recommendation to a client or a timely intervention to solve a pressing problem (Shulock, 1999, p. 289).

The problem-solving intent of the traditional and/or rationalist foundation to policy is particularly exemplified in a number of definitions of education policy explicated in the literature. For example, Kogan (1975, p. 55) describes policy as 'statements of prescriptive intent' and 'authoritative allocations of values'. Harman (1984, p. 13–14) defines policy as

'the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being followed or to be followed in dealing with a recognised problem or matter of concern and directed towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals'.

According to him, 'policy may also be conceived as a position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict and directed towards a particular objective'. Jennings (1977, p. 30) takes a similar position. He describes policy as 'a guide for taking future actions and for making appropriate choices or decisions towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired end'. He adds that, 'policy may also be thought of as setting out solutions to a problem', that is, the intent of changing existing conditions in ways which will solve a problem.

Gallagher (1992, pp. 2-3) for her part holds a very rigid view of what policy is. For her, 'policy is a formal act, has an agreed-upon intent, is sanctioned or approved by an institutional body or authority, and provides a consistent standard for measuring performance'. She, on the basis of these elements, defines "school policy" as 'the official choice of a school board or a local school to achieve a purpose systematically and

consistently' (Gallagher, 1992, pp. 2–3). The importance of the narrow limitation of policy to formal choices of school boards and other legitimate school authorities, according to her, allows for a move in to the discussion of how the formal choices can be made more effectively.

Viewed through the lens of the "state-centred" approach and its traditional/rationalist foundation to policy making, the problem-solving definition of policy is significant for a number of reasons. First, according to this conception, policy is, or could be taken to mean an event. A group of authorised decision-makers assemble to review a problem or a pressing issue and to take informed decisions to remedy the situation. This conception of policy as an event embedded in the state centred traditional/rational approach to the policy process is exemplified succinctly by Weiss (1982, p. 23). Illuminating the stages view of the traditional/rational foundation of policy in relation to the problem-solving intent, she notes:

'...a group of authorized decision makers assemble at particular times and places, review a problem...consider a number of alternative courses of action with more or less explicit calculation of the advantages and disadvantages of each opinion, weigh the alternatives against their goals or preferences, and then select an alternative that seems well suited for achieving their purposes. The result is a decision.'

Similarly, the problem-solving intents explicated above portray policy as a 'guide', and helps in revealing what Olssen et al. (2004, p. 60) refer to as the 'idealist and technocratic assumptions' underpinning traditional conceptions of policy. That is, it portrays policy as the expression of official purpose or statements of the courses of action that policy-makers and administrators are to follow (Harman, 1984; Codd, 1988). Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) capture these views succinctly. According to them, policy in the traditional foundation is thought of as a set of instructions from policy makers to policy implementers that spell out both goals and the means for achieving those goals.

Also, by the definitions alluded to above, policy is conceived and/or portrayed as a thing, and/or a product of policy making event or process. By stating that policy is "a guide for taking future actions", Jennings (1977) implies that policy is a product of the decision making process encapsulated in a document of some sort, containing a page or flips of pages indicating statement of intentions or of practice as it is perceived by policy actors or as they desire it to be.

These observations are relevant to theory as they capture the unique characteristic features of problem-solving definition of policy. However, the arguments or positions at the heart of these definitions however appear limited and static as they appear potentially to separate policy generation/formulation from the task of implementation (Bowe et al., 1992). The problem-solving agenda implicit in the traditional/rationalist foundation of policy processes tend to suggest or reduce education policy to a specification of principles, actions and routines (Codd, 1988; Trowler, 1998) related to educational issues, which are followed or which should be followed and which are designed to bring about desired goals, as opposed to a far more complex, dynamic and interactive undertaking and process (Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1983; Bowe et al., 1992; Ranson, 1995). Whitty and Edwards (1994, p. 15) for example reiterate the problem of conceptualizing education policy this way. They write:

'But to reduce education policy to the sum of innumerable individual decisions, even decisions seen as partly predetermined or considerably constrained, is to ignore what in some analytical traditions would be called

the power relations between different parts of the system and in others how decision-makers are positioned by different discourses.'

Thus the problem-solving definition derived from the rationalist approach to policy appears simplistic as it falls short of the dynamics of the policy process. It ignores the struggles over policy (particularly at the micro level) and reinforces a managerialist rationality of policy (Bowe et al, 1992; Vidovich, 2001). In particular, the "client orientation" appears to endorse the prevailing view of policymaking as relatively orderly in which the final products of the policy making process are seen as advice to clients and their usefulness is assessed on the basis of their contribution to eventual decisions by policymakers, rather than as a contribution to the broader political discourse. Similarly, the traditional/rationalist foundation appears over-deterministic in its approach to policy. By viewing policy as a guide and/or setting solutions to problems, the problem-solving conception embedded in the traditional/rationalist approach to policy seems to suggest or presuppose that once the policy choices and decisions invigorated in policy statements are well conceptualised and strictly followed, desired policy changes are bound to occur.

The process conception of policy

The process conceptualisation of policy is mainly a criticism of the over-determinism of the traditional approach to policy making and implementation. The approach, which apparently developed from the "policy cycle" conception of education policy analysis (Bowe et al, 1992; Ball, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b, 1994), adopts a more postmodernist orientation to policy and highlights the complex and contested nature of policy as a process rather than an end product (Vidovich, 2001, p. 7). Proponents of the process conceptualisation of policy (for example, Ball, 1994; Trowler, 1998; Rist, 2000; Olssen et al, 2004) hold different, more diffuse and less entrenched views from those who understand policy in quite straightforward terms as the actions of a government body or institution aimed at securing particular outcomes. They contend that policy is a dynamic process and that the problem-solving agenda embedded in the traditional/rationalist approach to policy unduly limits our understanding of the dynamics of the entire policy process.

Thus, the researchers and/or scholars working within the emergent "process" conception of policy use the dynamism of the policy process as an impetus to argue that how policy is used and/or understood depends to a considerable extent on the outlook and motive of the person or persons doing the "interpretive work". Ozga (2000) for example, sees education policy as a process rather than a product involving negotiations, contestations or struggle between different groups who may lie in or outside the formal machinery of official policy making. Trowler (1998) endorses this view strongly. He contends that policy documents and statements are always a result of struggles and compromises between the different individuals, groups and interests involved in the policy process. The contested and disputed character of policy, according to him is evident at two main levels of the policy process: the point of "encoding" and of "decoding". He refers to the 'encoding' level as the initial stage of formal policy-making where the ideas, values and aspirations of both the key actors involved in the policy process, and the people and/or interests they represent are elicited and enlisted via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations. The "decoding" stage, according to Trowler, is marked by the disputed and complex ways by which the policy messages and outcomes are interpreted by the policy actors and implementers in the contexts of their own culture, ideology, history, resources and expertise.

Shulock (1999, p. 229) agrees with this view and reiterates what in 'policy circles' is referred to as 'alternative democratic function of policy' in defence of the process conception. She explains that the view of policy as a dynamic process rests in the fact that policy is used as a language for framing political discourse and for getting the citizenry actively engaged in processes of democratisation. Rist (2000, p. 1002) sums these views up, noting that policy making as a process is multi-dimensional and multifaceted and stresses that:

'...the emphasis here on policy making being a process is deliberate. It is a process that evolves through cycles, with each cycle more or less bounded, more or less constrained by time, funds, political support, and other events. It is also a process that circles back on itself, iterates the same decision issue time and again, and often does not come to closure.'

Trowler (1998, p. 49) again captures the view of policy as a dynamic process much more clearly and succinctly. He indicates that the dynamism of the policy process comes from three main sources. Firstly, he argues that there is usually conflict among those who make policy and those who put policy in to practice, about what the important issues or problems for policy are and what the desired goals should be. Secondly, he points out that interpreting policy is an active process rather than a passive one. According to him, policy statements are almost always subject to multiple interpretations depending upon the standpoint and orientations of the people doing the interpretive "work". Finally, he explains that the practice of policy on the ground is extremely complex, both that being "described" by policy and that intended to put policy in to effect. For him, simple policy descriptions do not capture its multiplicity and complexity, and that the implementation of policy in practice almost always means outcomes differ from policy-makers' intentions.

This argument put forward by the scholars/researchers in the "process" foundation to the policy is important and appealing for a number of reasons. Firstly, it suggests the need for a modification, if not a fundamental reframing, of the traditional understanding of the policy process in which decision-making in the policy arena is understood as a discrete event, undertaken by a defined set of actors who reach their decision-making point on the basis of an analysis of their alternatives. In other words, the conception endorses the rejection of the 'idealist and technocratic assumptions' (Olssen et al, 2004, p. 60) underpinning the traditional foundation of policy where there is a quest for what Walford (2000) calls the authorial intentions presumed to lie behind the text. Rather, what it does recognise and reiterate is the point that policy is made up of language and as such contain divergent meanings, contradictions and structured omissions and that a plurality of readings that are liable, or likely to be produced are in themselves indicative of the existence of a plurality of readers (Codd, 1988). This however does not imply, as many proponents of this theoretical perspective believe, that any "reading" of the policy is possible and indeed valid. What it does explicate is the idea that while authors of texts cannot completely control the meaning that they attach to their texts, they strive to put in a reasonable amount of effort to exert such control by the means they have at their disposal. Thus, policy, according to the process model, is conceptualised as representations which are encoded and decoded via complex ways:

'The texts are the product of compromises [and contestations] at various stages, at the points of initial influence, in the micropolitics of legislative formulation, in the parliamentary process and the politics and micropolitics of interest group articulation. They are [indeed] typically the cannibalised products of multiple but circumscribed influences and agendas' (Ball, 1994, p. 16).

Rist (2000, p. 1003) supports this argument and succinctly quotes Weiss' (1982) words to demolish the traditional view of "decision making as an event":

'Given the fragmentation of authority across multiple bureaus, departments, and legislative committees, and the disjointed stages by which actions coalesce into decisions, the traditional model of decision making is a highly stylised rendition of reality... The complexity of governmental decision making often defies neat compartmentalization.'

Secondly, stating that the policy process is a dynamic process involving contestations, muddles, negotiations and agreements suggests that policy is not an end-product in and by itself but, rather a vehicle, involving the use of political power (Olssen et al, 2004) through which an end is, or could be reached. Closely related to this is the fact that the process conceptualisation brings to the fore the idea that policies by their very nature do shift and change in the face of modifications in their contexts over time. The contested and negotiated nature and character of the policy process presupposes that given time, policy representations are liable to shift and change and so are the key actors and interpreters as well as the possible interpretations and meanings that actors attach to policy. Ball captures this character of policy in his explanation that '[once formulated], policies shift and change their meanings in the arenas of politics; representations change, key interpreters...change...Policies are represented by different actors and interests' (1994, p. 17).

Furthermore, the argument about policy as a process alerts us to the fact that, policy making is not the preserve of political figureheads or politicians alone. People outside the official machinery for policy-making, depending on their orientations, motivations and interests towards the particular policy issues, may also be involved. As a dynamic process, policy process is therefore often messy and involves dialogues, struggles, contestations and confrontations. The process model further supports and reiterates the claim invariably that to assume that a text can have a single meaning or portray the actual intentions of the author(s) is to subscribe to what Olssen et al., (2004, p. 60) refers to as the 'intentional fallacy'. Ball (1994, p. 10–11) takes these concerns into account when he says:

'Policy is... an 'economy of power', a set of technologies and practices which are realized and struggled over in local settings. Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to the 'wild profusion' of local practice... Policy as practice is 'created' in a trialectic of dominance, resistance and chaos/freedom. Thus policy is no simple asymmetry of power.'

Equally, the view of policy as a dynamic and interactive process whose contested and disputed nature is evident at the points of 'encoding' and of 'decoding' is reminiscent of the post-modernist conceptualisation of policy as both 'text' and 'discourse'³ (Ball, 1993, 1994a, 1994b). As "text", the post-modernist view of policy extends to cover all the cultural artefacts of human communication. However, for the purposes of this paper, policy as "text" is exclusively taken to refer to written texts, and implies the complex ways in which textual representations are enlisted as a result of compromises and struggles. Policy as "discourse" on the other hand, and according to the post-modernist view draws on the ways in which the constraining effects of the discursive contexts set up by the policy makers come to the fore in putting policy into action (Trowler, 1998). That is, the way the ideas and propositions

enshrined or encapsulated in policy texts are articulated and/or expressed and how their interpretation constrains the 'intended' meanings of such texts. Conceptualising policy as a process, whose dynamism is evident at the encoding and decoding stages implies that policy is a site of struggle, negotiation and dialogue, in that both the encoding and decoding stages show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending for dominance. Thus, the conception of policy as a process emphasizes not only the diverse ways that policy is read, but equally the social agency of the policy process. The conception explicates the point that 'there are real struggles, disputes, conflicts and adjustments in the policy process and that these take place in a pre-established terrain' (Ball, 1994, p. 28).

Thus, the strength of the process conceptualisation or model of policy is grounded in its potential focuses on understanding and reiterating actor interaction in policy processes. In particular, the conception focuses on examining what individuals and groups actually do in response to policy. That notwithstanding, the approach does attract serious criticisms from a number of authors. Dale (1991) for example views Ball's prioritisation of "agency" over a more structural emphasis as a major weakness of the process conception of policy. Lingard (1993) on his part acknowledges that the problem-solving conception of policy is theoretically driven whilst the process model is empirically driven but rejects what appears to be the dualism promulgated by the process conception on the grounds that both the problem-solving and process models are similar. Henry (1993) criticises the process conception embedded in the "postmodernist flight" from "'totalising' structural analysis", for missing what she refers to as engagement with neo-Marxist and feminist perspective. Evans et al. (1994) add to the list of criticisms. They see the process conception of policy as more useful and they endorse much of what the researchers in this tradition say. However, they do not believe that the embedded Foucauldian conception of "discursive power" (as exercised or practiced rather than possessed) could capture positional and material forms of power which they attribute to the government or state. Fitz and Halpin (1994) on their part characterise the process conception as part of the recent "bottom up" approach to policy, and thus subject to inherent limitations such as overemphasising the ability of the periphery to frustrate the centre.

More broadly, the weakness of the process conception of policy rests in the fact that the model is tentative (Walford, 2000), as it seeks to 'replace the modernist theoretical project of abstract parsimony with a somewhat more post-modernist one of localised complexity' (Ball, 1994, p. 14), and in the process fails to take account of what Ozga (2000) refers to as the "bigger picture". In other words, its emphasis appears to be more on micro-political processes and the agency of individual practitioners in constructing policy at the local level at the expense of the macro or national level activities. Trowler captures this weakness much more succinctly. According to him, the process conception of policy and in fact, all phenomenological approaches to policy, among other things, overestimate the discretion of the micro level actors of policy and fail to recognise the fact that it is the macro level actors that set the ground rules for the negotiations, dialogues, contestations and struggles (1998).

Although the above criticism of the process model to conceptualising policy is quite critical and damning, Ball's (1994) defence is particularly relevant. Although he does not take the issue head-on, he argues particularly against the ruling out of certain forms and conception of social actions on the grounds that they are simply awkward, theoretically challenging or difficult. The issue for him, and as others: (for example, Trowler, 1998; Ozga, 2000; Walford, 2000; Olssen et al, 2004) also agree is the need for, and urgency of relating together analytically the ad hoc-ery of two levels (macro and micro levels). The point therefore, and as Ball also agrees is that of accounting for agency in a constrained world, and showing how

agency and structure are implicit in each other, that is, within a dialectical process of continuing structuration (Giddens, 1984).

Gauging a working definition of policy

The key focus of this paper, as indicated earlier, is on drawing a conceptual leverage on both the problem-solving conception and process models of policy explicated in the literature with the view to gauging a working definition which will provide an understanding of the dynamics of the policy process and how policy and practice exist in a dynamic and iterative relationship. The approach taken therefore is to draw together the two approaches/conceptions of policy with the view to emphasizing their relative strengths while complementing for the implicit weaknesses of each of them. This approach is informed by the increasing acknowledgement of the benefits of 'theoretical eclecticism' (Cibulka, 1994; Scribner et al, 1994; Ball, 1997; Taylor, 1997; Vidovich, 2001), based on the assumption that combining theoretical perspectives offers complementary analytic "tools", and therefore a more "complete picture" than any one theory. The intention here, of course, is not to produce what Vidovich (2001, p. 11) for instance calls a 'grand theory', but a useful conceptual working definition of policy which is said to be disappearing fast under the prevailing economic global dispensation (Ozga, 2000).

Significantly, the exploration of issues in this paper leads the contributor to suggest that whether policy is conceived as implicit or explicit specifications of courses of actions to be followed in dealing with a recognised issue of concern, or a process involving dialogue, negotiations, contestations and struggle between various actors within and outside policy making machinery, fundamental overlaps exist between the two opposing traditions. This observation, in my view, precludes that policy, and in particular, education policy is neither a product of policy making nor a dialectical process of continuing structuration (Giddens, 1984), but both. Ball (1994, pp. 10–11) seems to identify himself with this stance when he says 'policy is what is enacted as well as what is intended'. Policy as what is enacted, in my view, connotes the entire policy trajectory (involving the power relations between the micro and macro levels actors as well as the discursive contexts) within which the policy activities take place. Policy as what is intended (or policy as intentions) in this context denotes that which is thought of, conceived, designed and advanced and/or positioned purposely to achieve desirable outcomes. This illustration does imply that policy is both that which is thought of and positioned to alter existing situation or situations as much as that which is struggled over within the policy terrain. Taking a more comprehensive and less entrenched position from the proponents of the two opposing perspectives, my view of what policy, particularly education policy is, concurs with Olssen et al, (2004), who perceive policy fundamentally as entailing the exercise of power and the language and/or discourse that is used to legitimate the process.

Generally, the eclectic approach adopted in this paper, which draws together both traditional problem-solving and process conceptions of policy implicitly appears to meet Vidovich's (2001) suggestion of the qualities of a useful conceptual framework for policy analysis. According to her, a useful framework for policy analysis is one which demonstrates the following three modifications to Ball's "policy cycle" (process) approach. First, the framework extends Ball's policy cycle approach from within an individual nation-state to the global context. Second, it incorporates state-centred constraints than evident in the policy cycle (process) conception of policy. Third, it highlights explicitly the interlinkages between different levels and contexts of the policy process. All these are inherent features of the eclectic conceptual approach and/or definition adopted by this paper.

Again, the explanation or approach adopted in this paper, and which takes account of the two opposing conceptions of policy thus explains why, based on the following illustrations, education policy is often used synonymously with notions such as "goals", "plans" and "programmes". Firstly, policy, like goals, has aspects of giving direction to choosing or deciding. That is, 'stating a policy has the effect of indicating the choices that are preferable in terms of what is to be achieved' (Hecló, cited in Jennings, 1977, p. 30). Secondly, policy has a future orientation. Notions of intent and of accomplishment over time or at some later time mean that a series of choices or decisions are expected and required. Thirdly, in the context of decision-making, policy, like programmes and plans allows for changes and modifications to be made to meet the aspirations, hopes and needs of the time.

Conclusion

By reviewing definitions explicated in the policy literature, this paper sought to provide conceptual insights into the meaning of the term "policy" in particular, and an understanding of the dynamics of the policy process in general. The traditional problem-solving definition of policy views policy fundamentally as a thing, a guide and a document of some sort, containing a page or flips of pages indicating policy choices reached by policy makers and which policy implementers or actors are to follow in dealing with a recognised problem of concern, and is thus criticised for two main reasons. First, the view is criticised for neglecting the socio-cultural dynamism of policy processes. Secondly, the traditional problem-solving definition is criticised for its over-determinism. That is, its reduction of education policy to a specification of principles, actions and routines (Codd, 1988; Trowler, 1998) and the pre-supposition that once policy choices and decisions invigorated in policy statements are well conceptualised and strictly followed, desired policy changes are bound to occur.

The process model on the other hand views policy as a dynamic process and focuses on understanding actor interaction as far as policy formulation, articulation, dissemination and interpretation are concerned. The process conceptualisation pays particular attention to the 'social agency of the policy process' (Ball, 1994, p. 23) and is thus criticised for its over concentration on examining what policy actors do in response to policy. In other words, the process conception is criticised for overestimating the discretion of the micro level actors of policy and forgetting that it is the macro level actors who set the ground rules for the negotiations involved in the policy process.

A critical observation and review of the views from the two schools of thoughts illuminated in this paper leads the contributor to take the path of "theoretical eclecticism" based on the old unfashionable sociological and postmodernist thinking which precludes that in the analysis of complex social issues, two theories are probably better than one (Ball, 1994). The decision to adopt a composite theory approach in this paper is grounded in the believe that both the traditional problem-solving and process models are capable of complementing each other and together offering greater insights about policy processes. It is in my view that policy is neither a problem-solving tool nor a process, but both. Policy is that which is made and set intentionally to rectify an issue of concern as much as that which is enacted and/or struggled over within the policy terrain. Significantly, my view about what is policy concurs with that of Olssen et al (2004) who argue that policy fundamentally entails the exercise of power and language that is used to legitimate the process.

Whilst there may be several general implications of the issues explored, the paper privileges two. Firstly, and as Ozga (2000) also agrees, the issues emanating from the paper imply obviously that how policy is conceived, conceptualised and operationalised would to a large

extent depend on the motive of the person or persons doing the interpretive work as much as on the discursive context within which the policy "activity" takes place. A second major and overarching implication is that which Richardson (2007) emphasized that policy-making as an act is complex and indeterminate, with no guarantee of absolute control over the process. As Hogwood and Gunn's (cited by Richardson, 2007) rightly put it, what constitutes policy, its origin, purpose and projections may be ambiguous, either deliberately or as a result of transmutation and accretion. The question therefore of what is policy should alert policy-makers, implementers, analysts and actors in general to begin to think of, and incorporate into their conceptual and/or analytical frameworks a non-linear and eclectic policy trajectory that has the potential of tracking the continuous transformations between the macro and micro levels of policy processes.

Thus, while a cluster of contrasting features have been used to distinguish between what in the context of this paper are referred to as the problem-solving and process conceptions of policy, the approach adopted here is to reject the notion of a distinct dichotomy and to focus on the cusp or amalgamation of these two approaches. Other writers strongly support this "a foot in both camps" approach. For example, Aronowitz and Giroux (1990) have argued for both modernist and postmodernist discourses resonated in the respective problem-solving and process models in this paper to be examined with the view to seeing how each counteracts the weaknesses of the other, and possibly drawing from the strength of each. Ozga (2000, p. 50) endorses this view strongly. She asserts that 'a simple polarity of pluralism and Marxism is no longer sufficient to capture these kinds of choices of theoretical resource available to researchers'. The conceptual insight and/or working definition of policy offered in this paper might, as Vidovich (2001, p. 4) suggests, be described therefore as "critical postmodernism" as it draws understanding from both problem-solving and process conceptualisations of policy.

Notes

1. The process conceptualization of policy in theory extends to cover post-structuralism and a whole range of policy science literature. However, in the context of this paper, the notion is taken to refer mainly to the post-modernist understanding of contemporary society which stresses the existence of different "life-worlds", the focus on smaller parcels of knowledge and the study of society in its fragments and in its daily details (See for example: Fontana, 2002; Trowler, 1998).
2. Thus, while the focus of the paper is clear from the onset, I remain aware that the fact that I am having to explore what I refer to in this context as the problem-solving and process conceptions of policy without duly delving into their respective modernist and postmodernist philosophical and/or theoretical underpinnings directly makes me liable to the inescapable criticism of 'reductionism'.
3. The conception of policy as both "text" and "discourse" is not implied and/or meant to be seen as and read into as if they are different positions. In fact, researchers in this tradition (for example, Codd, 1988; Ball, 1994; Corbitt, 1997; Trowler, 1998; Walford, 2000; Fontana, 2002; Olssen et al, 2004) see and bring these together in the literature as a single conception.

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