

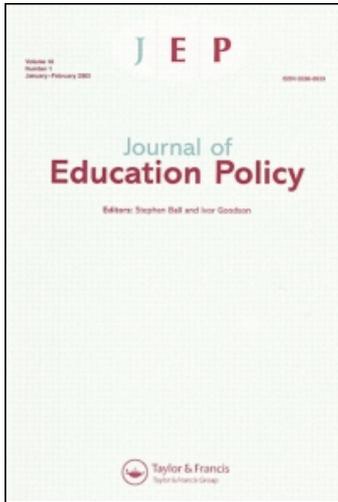
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Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Education Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713693402>

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Online Publication Date: 01 November 2006

To cite this Article Hodgson, Ann and Spours, Ken(2006)'An analytical framework for policy engagement: the contested case of 14-19 reform in England',Journal of Education Policy,21:6,679 — 696

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02680930600969233

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930600969233>

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An analytical framework for policy engagement: the contested case of 14–19 reform in England

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This article attempts to construct an analytical framework to reflect upon the deeply contested area of 14–19 education and training policy in England following the publication of the Government's White Paper *14–19 education and skills*. We argue that the evolution of 14–19 policy over the last 15 years, culminating in the publication of the Tomlinson Final Report on 14–19 reform and then its rejection by the Government, might be better understood by looking at this area through the application of four related conceptual tools—political eras, the education state, the policy process and the operation of political space. These concepts or tools are used here both to narrate historical and recent 14–19 developments, to critique current policy-making in this area, and to identify opportunities and challenges facing researchers seeking to engage with the policy process. We suggest that this analytical framework might not only be applied to reform in the 14–19 phase but also to education policy more widely.

Introduction

This article was born out of a defeat and is written at a difficult time for those interested in 14–19 reform in England. The Government's White Paper, *14–19 education and skills* (DfES, 2005a), clearly stated an intention to retain academic qualifications—A Levels and GCSEs—and to focus reform on vocational education. In doing so, it effectively rejected the idea of a comprehensive post-14 phase signalled by proposals for a unified diploma system, outlined in the Final Report of the Tomlinson Working Group on 14–19 Reform (2004a). The White Paper also brought to a close a two-year period of public debate about the nature of 14–19 education and training which appeared to have arrived at a broad consensus for simultaneous reform of both academic and vocational learning. The Working Group, chaired by Mike Tomlinson,

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had involved thousands of young people, practitioners, researchers and policy-makers in developing its proposals and had conducted two formal written consultation processes around the fundamental principles of reform (Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2003) and the main diploma architecture (Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2004b). Responses to both by teacher and lecturer professional associations and unions as well as individual practitioners demonstrated broad professional support for the Working Group's central concept of a unified and inclusive 14–19 curriculum and qualifications framework. The Government thus not only missed an opportunity for much needed system reform, but also demonstrated its disregard for the educational professional voice in the policy process.

Here we reflect on our role as researchers involved with the reform of 14–19 education in England over the last 15 years. We use this experience as the starting point for developing a framework or set of conceptual tools to aid researchers and practitioners to engage with policy-makers in the creation of a more inclusive 14–19 education system. The analytical framework comprises four related dimensions—political eras; the education state; the policy process and the concept of 'political space'. These are used as a way of explaining policy-making in this field. We also suggest that they could be used to guide strategies for what we term 'policy engagement' at a time of professional and researcher disenchantment with the policy process and in a changing policy landscape. While this analytical framework has been developed as a result of reflection on 14–19 reform in England, it may be applicable more widely.

A changed policy landscape

The way that education policy-making takes place in the UK has changed dramatically since the 1944 Education Act with its relatively straightforward model of a tripartite balance of power between national Government, local education authorities (LEAs) and education providers—each playing its own particular part in the translation of policy into practice (Ball, 1997). While this may represent a somewhat simplistic view of the way education legislation was enacted in the period following the Second World War, it is undeniably true that policy-making in the early twenty-first century is a very different business. This change has resulted from a fundamental economic, political and ideological disturbance of post-war governance stemming primarily from the policies associated with the 18 years of Conservative rule in the 1980s and 1990s, much of which has been continued under New Labour administrations (Clarke *et al.*, 2000; Phillips & Furlong, 2001).

It is possible to observe at least five major inter-related changes in the policy-making process which date back to the mid-1970s but which have, arguably, continued or even accelerated during the period since New Labour came into power in 1997 (Newman, 2001). It could also be argued that these changes, which have created a new form of education state, have affected post-compulsory education and training as much, if not more than, compulsory education, despite the former's non-statutory status.

The growth of ‘arms length’ agencies

Since the formation of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in 1973, there has been a rapid expansion of quasi-autonomous non-Governmental organizations (quangos) or non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) involved in education policy-making in compulsory and, more often, post-compulsory education and training, as well as a growth in the number of more specialist education policy units inside Government itself (Du Gay, 2000). This trend, which took hold under the four successive Conservative administrations has increased in pace under New Labour. We now have, for example, powerful unelected quangos, such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Ofsted, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), regulating, funding and organizing education and training provision, as well as the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit and the Post-16 Teaching and Learning Standards Unit inside the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), formulating national policy for post-16 education and training providers. These organizations are seen as ‘arms length’ Government agencies (Hoggett, 1994) operating directly between ministers, representing national Government, and education providers. Not only do they raise problems of democratic legitimacy but they have also, arguably, added considerable complexity into the learning and skills landscape (Coffield *et al.*, 2005).

Political centralization

Political centralization is not simply reflected in the rise of NDPBs. Under New Labour, an army of political advisers has been drafted into key Government departments, including education. Moreover, because education has remained a prime focus for the New Labour Government throughout its three terms of office, it has become a personal agenda of the Prime Minister and, therefore, of his Policy Unit. Members of this Unit have wielded unprecedented power in the education policy process and on several occasions have directly intervened in ministerial decisions. This has resulted in mercurial and highly politicized decision-making in education policy as issues, often raised in the media, flit on or off the ‘political radar screen’ of No. 10 Downing Street. This Unit’s power to determine policy outcomes increases during pre-election periods, as the Tomlinson Working Group was to find to its cost in 2005.

The introduction of a quasi market in education

The 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act introduced a ‘quasi-market’ (Levacic, 1995) into education to stimulate institutional competition in the belief that it would increase efficiency and drive up quality. This approach has been broadly continued under New Labour as part of a wider public sector ‘modernization’ agenda which is having powerful effects on other areas of Government, such as health and social services (Du Gay, 2000; Newman, 2000). The

education quasi-market comprises a range of changes—increasing autonomy for individual education providers; the introduction of new private providers; the encouragement of parents to see themselves as consumers of public services and the use of powerful national steering mechanisms as a form of accountability and to retain political leverage in what could have become a much more devolved system.

The result has been a more complex and unpredictable education policy process (Hodgson *et al.*, 2005). Considerable power has been vested in the hands of institutional managers—head teachers and college principals—and their individual actions are crucial in such a system. At the same time, their behaviour is strongly influenced by powerful steering mechanisms (e.g., funding, targets and inspection) operated by central Government through arms length agencies. Institutional decisions in relation to these key steering mechanisms, notably funding, can lead to unintended and uneven as well as intended policy outcomes (Hayward *et al.*, 2005; Hodgson *et al.*, 2005). The quasi market has also increased the power of certain groups of parents and learners through the introduction of league tables, specialist institutions and a relaxation in the admissions policies of schools and colleges. This has accelerated the politicization of the policy process as Governments vie for votes of influential constituencies. The big loser in the shift towards a quasi market in education, accompanied by centralist steering mechanisms, has been local governance (Sullivan *et al.*, 2004), in the form of the LEA with its vision of a more ordered local landscape informed by local democratic accountability (Harris & Ranson, 2005).

What counts as policy text?

In the past, what counted as ‘education policy text’ was a relatively simple question to answer—White Papers, Acts of Parliament and influential reports by Government commissions (e.g., Plowden, Crowther). These still exist in the policy process but they have been joined by a veritable flood of different types of policy documents from both central Government and its agencies, as ever-changing ministers launch repeated initiatives and national Government seeks to manage the education and training market at the institutional level. Apart from the plethora of consultative Green Papers and policy-making White Papers, features of earlier eras of policy-making in this country, there are ‘next steps’ documents, strategy documents, consultation documents, curriculum documents, guidance documents and so on. Moreover, lifelong learning policy documents are no longer simply the preserve of one Government department—the Department for Trade and Industry, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Treasury and Cabinet Office are increasingly involved alongside the DfES, often contradicting rather than supporting one another. Key questions for those studying policy are which documents take precedence and where policy is actually created (Bowe *et al.*, 1992).

Devolution

Devolution of power to the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies in the latter part of the twentieth century means that the UK now has at least three types of education

systems within it, each of which has somewhat different policy-making processes (Byrne & Raffe, 2005). The gradual rise in power of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and regional Government may further diversify national policy-making. It is no longer possible to talk of UK education policy. While this introduces another level of complexity for policy analysis, it also provides the potential for policy analysts to use the tool of 'home international' comparison (Raffe, 2005) as the compulsory and post-compulsory education systems of Scotland and Wales diverge from that of England (Finlay & Egan, 2004).

These five shifts in the context for education policy-making have changed the nature and level of governance and disrupted an old and more predictable policy process. However, they have not produced a new stable order. Instead, they have introduced complexity, reduced democratic accountability, increased unpredictability and unintended outcomes and generated policy contradictions through politicized decision-making. For those involved in the reform process, this context is both a frustration and an opportunity. Frustration arises from simply trying to keep track of it all and from an inability to intervene constructively in all this 'policy busyness' (Hayward *et al.*, 2005) and in the rushed and impatient process of policy-making (Menter *et al.*, 2005). On the other hand, opportunities occur because such a complex process is less than monolithic; there is a strong role for local interpretation and spaces open up due to policy contradictions. It is for this reason that we now explore, through the case of 14–19 education and training, an analytical framework aimed at providing a better understanding of a changing policy terrain. In doing so we consider, in particular, the role of the researcher in the identification, generation and use of political space as a way of engaging with the reform process.

Existing models for policy analysis—a partial and fragmented picture

Underlying all analysis of education policy and the policy-making process from the 1970s onwards, unsurprisingly, has been a discussion of the role of power and its distribution (see Kogan, 1975; Ball, 1990; Ozga, 2000). However, we would argue that policy has been studied in a fragmented and partial way, mainly from the perspective of different disciplines—history, economics, politics, sociology and philosophy—and with a focus largely on compulsory education. In addition, there have been disagreements within the education research community about the role of research in policy-making (see Hargreaves, 1996; Tooley & Darby, 1998; Hammersley, 2002; Nutley, 2003; Gewirtz, 2004).

Researchers from different disciplines have looked at the policy process and the role of research in different ways. Historians have tended to focus on key events, documents and periods (see Silver, 1990). Economists have written about the relationship between the economy, globalization, economic shifts and education (see Finegold & Soskice, 1988). Political analysts have emphasized the role of Government, ideology and pressure groups (see Kogan, 1975). Sociologists have highlighted the interplay of power between different key actors and the impact of wider societal factors (see Ball, 1990; Gale, 2001; Whitty, 2002). Philosophers (see McLaughan, 2000; Pring, 2000),

on the other hand, have stressed the importance of understanding the values, purposes and assumptions that lie behind the thinking of politicians, key documents and discourses.

Most of these analysts have focused primarily on compulsory education (see *Bowe et al.*, 1992) or higher education (*Gale*, 2001) with a relative neglect of the growing phase in-between. However, the literature on policy analysis began to turn its attention to post-compulsory education and training in the 1990s in an attempt to make sense of the UK Conservative Government's paradigm of marketization (see *Ainley & Corney*, 1990; *Macrae et al.*, 1997; *Ball et al.*, 2000). This was followed by a growing body of literature on New Labour and 'third way' politics (see *Ainley*, 1998; *Hodgson & Spours*, 1999; *Avis*, 2000, *Selwyn & Fitz*, 2001; *Hyland*, 2002; *Whitty*, 2002), though to date it has been confined largely to evidence about policy-making in New Labour's early years.

There has been no shortage of debate, therefore, about the nature of the relationship between policy-makers, practitioners and researchers and useful models of the education policy-making process and its 'contestation' at different levels have been developed (see *Bowe et al.*, 1992; *Malen & Knapp*, 1997). However, we would argue that the models that exist at present are not adequate as a framework of analysis for understanding the current context for 14–19 education because, in the main, they relate to a previous era of policy-making; they are largely focused on schools and do not consider the specificities of the 14–19 phase of education. They may, therefore, not offer sufficient guidance for researchers wishing both to analyse current policy and to intervene more effectively in this area of policy-making.

A framework of analysis for 14–19 education policy

We now proceed to describe an analytical policy framework comprising four inter-related dimensions or tools—'political eras', 'the education state', 'the policy process' and 'political space'—which builds on the work of *Bowe et al.* (1992) by placing their concept of a policy triangle within an historical, political and state context (see Figure 1). Each of these tools is applied to 14–19 education and training policy.

Dimension 1. Political eras

Policy analysts, when describing policy-makers' inability to learn from the past in relation to 14–19 reform, refer to 'policy amnesia' (*Higham et al.*, 2002; *Higham & Yeomans*, 2005). We would contend that this condition is caused by a short political cycle, dominated by the politics of general elections; by the rapid turnover of ministerial teams, political advisers and civil servants, which prevents the building of 'policy memory'. Policy amnesia is compounded by a lack of trust in the education profession with its 'grounded' memory of what has worked in particular contexts.

In recognition of the importance of policy memory, the first dimension of our analytical framework acknowledges, as have others before us, the necessity of providing an historical and wider contextual analysis for interpreting policy-making trends

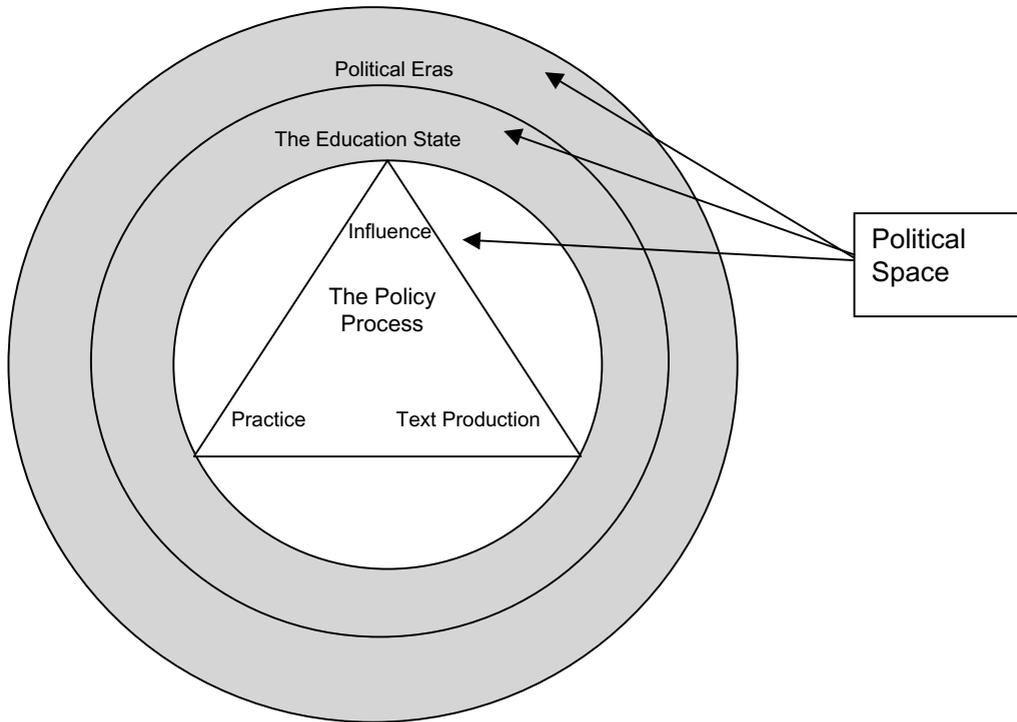


Figure 1. An analytical policy framework

and particular ‘moments’ in the education policy process (Ball, 1990; Whitty, 2002; Apple, 2003). It is also important to be able to identify the underlying ideological basis for political decision-making in order to understand the values underpinning particular policies (Taylor *et al.*, 1997).

One way of employing an historical perspective is to place policy and the development of state structures within the wider set of societal and political transformations that have been experienced in the UK and beyond over the last 25 years. These constitute what we term a ‘political era’—the period from the early 1980s to the present has been characterized as one of neo-liberalism, which is ‘much larger than the project of any party or political grouping’ (Johnson & Steinberg, 2004, p. 8). In their comparison of Thatcherism and Blairism, Johnson and Steinberg argue that they represent different phases of neo-liberalism, with Thatcherism characterized as ‘social authoritarian’ and Blairism as ‘statist/managerial’ neo-liberalism. Like Newman (2005), they argue that Blairism is not simply a ‘rhetorically repackaged’ Thatcherism, but represents a new, more progressive settlement within a neo-liberal era. Within the area of education in England, however, we suggest that the post-Tomlinson 14–19 and Schools White Papers’ settlement of 2005–2006 can be seen to represent a clearer line of continuity with the previous administration than may be evident in other policy fields, such as health. We feel reasonably confident, therefore, in talking about a single political era from the late 1980s to the present.

In this article, where we are considering education policy and the 14–19 phase in particular, we use the term ‘political era’ as a period of politics and policy-making framed by three major factors—underlying societal shifts and historical trends which affect the ‘shape’ of the education and training system, dominant political ideology which affects the parameters for reform, and national and international education debates which either support or contest the dominant ideology. These three factors, together with the education state, which we discuss separately, create a form of equilibrium.¹

In terms of 14–19 education and training in England, we argue that the period from the mid-1980s to the present, despite changes in political parties, broadly constitutes a single political era dominated by divisive and selective approaches to curriculum and qualifications development, marketised organizational arrangements (see for example Department of Education *et al.*, 1991; DfES, 2005a, b) and voluntarist approaches to work-based training and the youth labour market (Hodgson & Spours, 2004).

The shape of the post-14 education and training system has remained broadly the same, in terms of participation rates, since the mid-1990s (Hayward *et al.*, 2005). The most significant societal shifts for education took place in the mid-1980s as a result of changes in the economy and social aspirations linked to Thatcherism, together with reforms to the qualifications system: a mix of factors which drove up levels of full time post-16 participation (National Commission on Education, 1993). At this point, the education and training system moved from a mixed low participation system to a school-based medium participation and achievement system (Spours, 1996). New Labour has not been able to significantly expand post-16 participation because it is not riding the wave of social change that took place in the 1980s; the relationship between the labour market and the education system remains the same; and it has not tackled curricular and institutional divisions within the education system itself, despite a constant stream of piecemeal and reactive initiatives (e.g., the New Deal, Curriculum 2000, Education Maintenance Allowances and changes to apprenticeships) (Hayward *et al.*, 2005).

The argument of a single political era since the 1980s is also sustained by the continuing dominance of the ideology of marketization and divisive approaches to education system expansion—ideas and practices fully developed under the Conservatives in the early 1990s and not fundamentally challenged by New Labour. Education providers are encouraged to compete as well as to collaborate (DfES, 2004); new specialist institutions are being created to enter the market place (DfES, 2005b), league tables and inspection regimes reinforce competition; and the 14–19 White Paper (DfES, 2005a) codifies the divisions between academic and vocational learning through the retention of GCSEs and A Levels and the setting up of a separate pathway of ‘specialized diplomas’.

However, the 14–19 political era also contains an alternative set of national and international debates and blueprints proposing a more unified and inclusive approach to expanding upper secondary education systems. In England, these ideas can be traced back to the publication of *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.*, 1990),

together with other unification proposals throughout the 1990s (Hodgson & Spours, 2003). More recently, unification ideas moved to a more prominent position in national policy debates, culminating in the Tomlinson Final Report (Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2004a). Internationally, the idea of a more unified approach has also been a feature of European system reforms (Lasonen & Young, 1998).

Arguments for a unified and comprehensive approach to the 14–19 phase could be interpreted as a desire to bring to an end a political era of upper secondary education dominated by conservative market-led and divisive ideology and to open up a new and progressive era of system expansion based on inclusion and collaboration. However, these ideas by themselves, which have influenced the education profession and practice at the local level, have not proved strong enough to break the equilibrium of the political era.

How, therefore, does the concept of ‘political era’ assist with an understanding of the 14–19 policy process and the issue of policy engagement? It suggests that a number of factors—socio-economic, political, cultural, curricular, organizational and labour market—have to be linked together to provide the conditions for a new political era where transformative ideas and practices can take root and flourish. It also provides a clue to political failure. The Tomlinson proposals for curricular change did not prevail in 2005, not only on account of Government political pragmatism, but because they were not explicitly linked to a wider set of changes. However, the Tomlinson ideas are now embedded in the policy memory of many researchers, policy-makers and practitioners and, in this sense, they still serve to contest the dominant ideas of the political era.

Dimension 2. The education state

The second dimension of the analytical framework is the ‘education state’ which can be seen as a manifestation of the political era and a reinforcing element within it. However, like Apple (2003) we do not see the education state as a simple reflection of wider social and economic relations but as a site of contestation and, therefore, possessing a degree of autonomy from fundamental material interests.

Given this definition, the education state can be seen to comprise a range of national, regional and local structures and institutions, including the No. 10 Policy Unit, DfES, the regulatory and awarding bodies, inspectorates, funding bodies and public and private education providers. This definition, therefore, goes beyond purely Governmental institutions and quangos and tries to capture the significant role of a set of key players within the contested landscape of education policy (Ball, 1990; Ozga, 2000). Like Kogan (1975), we also include in our definition education pressure groups, such as professional associations, teacher unions and think tanks, as well as the education media and key individuals, all of whom exercise different degrees of political power and influence at different points in the policy process.

The education state under New Labour has considerable continuity with the Conservative education state—it is highly centralist with an even greater number of unified organizations (e.g., QCA, the Learning and Skills Council and now a unified

inspectorate) and political advisers; it continues to use arms-length agencies and powerful steering and accountability mechanisms to drive autonomous institutional behaviour; it has increased the private/public mix in education and the role of local governance has remained weak (Hodgson *et al.*, 2005).

There are, however, two countervailing trends—devolution of power to Scotland and Wales (and possibly to the regions) and the concept of joined-up Government (Newman, 2001). Reform-minded devolved Governments (and this is the case in terms of 14–19 education and training in Scotland and Wales) can increase pressure on England to make changes and can be a source of policy learning. The move to joined-up Government, which relies on different Government agencies working together at the local level for the good of the learner (for example through the Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003a) agenda) may also exert a subtle pressure for reform of the education state through its reinforcement of the pivotal role for local Government.

Governance at the local level is important in terms of 14–19 policy and practice because it is at this level that collaboration takes place between education institutions to provide a range of learning opportunities and progression routes for learners. This type of governance and collaborative arrangement at the local level challenges both central Government control and institutional autonomy. While local learning and skills councils have struggled to introduce an element of local planning into the 14–19 education market (Hodgson *et al.*, 2005), there are some powerful historical and current examples of innovative initiatives and practices in 14–19 education and training at the local level in England which take forward the unified and inclusive Tomlinson principles, despite the national policy climate. Nevertheless, the 14–19 education and training system in England as a whole remains both divided and ‘weakly collaborative’ (Hayward *et al.*, 2005).

The significance of the education state for 14–19 policy analysis is that it offers a way of understanding the interplay of different levels of governance and how space for policy-making can be afforded to the different actors within it. Discussion within the Nuffield 14–19 Review has so far concluded that a more devolved education state, representing a better balance between national, regional, local and institutional decision-making (Stanton, 2004) would provide a more favourable environment for a collaborative 14–19 phase. More importantly, however, being able to debate issues and to make policy at the right level might also lead to the creation of more ‘deliberative judgement [which] emerges through collective interactive discourse’ (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003, p. 23). This open and interactive style of policy-making stands in contrast to the current Government’s politicized and error-prone policy process.

Dimension 3. The policy process

This third dimension of the analytical framework is an attempt to capture the dynamic and messy nature of policy-making from its inception to its implementation. It recognizes that below the level of political and ideological intentions and within the

education state, there are a complex set of actions and players that contribute to the policy process. This part of the analytical framework has to be able to accommodate and explain inequalities in the exercise of power, why crises occur, how new ideas enter the policy process and the relationship between policy and practice.

This dimension of analysis is based upon the ‘policy triangle’ (Bowe *et al.*, 1992), which describes three contexts within which education policy is formulated and enacted—the ‘context of influence’, the ‘context of policy text production’ and the ‘context of practice’. This triangle illustrates the dynamic, contested and cyclical nature of the policy process and the role of key players within it. Practitioners are seen as contributors to the policy process and there is a recognition that policy is not simply a transmission-belt from central Government downwards. The model thus helps to explain why policies may be conceived in one way at the level of policy text production, for example, but be interpreted in another at the level of implementation, and how both intended and unintended outcomes may occur. It also helps to explain how different parties in the policy-making process might have a privileged position at different points in the policy cycle. Practitioners, for example, are likely to have little power at the point where policies are conceived, but the balance of power may move strongly in their favour at the point where the policy is enacted and where they can either mould or subvert Government intentions. Here we briefly apply the concept of the ‘policy triangle’, within the wider concepts of political eras and the education state, to explain the role of the unified 14–19 curriculum and qualifications perspective in the policy process.

During the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, support for a unified reform perspective was built within the education profession and research communities and even reached into the policies of opposition political parties (e.g., the Labour Party’s 14–19 reform proposals in *Aiming higher* in 1996). This period marked the gradual building of a consensus for a unified approach to 14–19 education and training, both within the context of influence and within the context of implementation, where it became manifested in ‘bottom-up’ reform initiatives (e.g., unified modular and unitization experiments). However, it was not until 2003, during David Miliband’s term as Minister for School Standards, that unification reform proposals broke surface into national policy text production with the publication of the Government’s response (DfES, 2003b) to the first 14–19 Green Paper *Extending opportunities, raising standards* (DfES, 2002). The unified reform perspective was reinforced further by the Tomlinson Final Report on 14–19 curriculum and qualifications reform with its proposals for a unified and inclusive multi-level diploma system.

At the point when it appeared that all three contexts of the policy triangle—*influence, policy text production and implementation*—were aligned to support a unified approach, the 14–19 White Paper (DfES, 2005a) disrupted the policy text corner of the triangle as a result of political intervention from Downing Street in a pre-election period. The explanation for this can be found not only through our previous arguments about the persistence of a dominant political era but also through the limitations of change by crisis. The Tomlinson Working Group had been afforded its opportunity for reform because of the A Level crisis of 2002 and David Miliband’s

‘championship’ of unified qualifications reform.² Politics was to show that this was not sufficient to open up a new era for 14–19 education and training. Support for a more unified approach to this phase still resides within sections of the education state and within the education profession at large, where practitioner communities responsible for the implementation of Government policy continue to be influenced by the unification logic. Forces for systemic reform have not been neutralized—they continue to inhabit and invade important political spaces.

Dimension 4. Political space

The concept of ‘political space’ describes the opening up of opportunity for different stakeholders to influence the policy process. Political space can be realized in several ways—it can be created by the ‘battle of ideas’ over a period of time; it can result from spaces offered in the reform process either intentionally (for example, from more open forms of consultation) or unintentionally (as the result of crises). Political space can also be reinforced by what we term ‘tipping debates’.³

Research intervention can both create political space and work within it. As we have seen, in the case of 14–19 curriculum and qualifications reform in England, researchers have worked alongside professional associations and think tanks for more than a decade to open a debate about the development of a flexible and unified 14+ curriculum and qualifications system. This long-term work, combined with the effects of the A Level crisis in 2002, created the political space for researchers and practitioners to work ‘for policy’ within the Tomlinson 14–19 Working Group and the professional and political groups aligned with it. Unfortunately, this hegemony did not stretch sufficiently into public consciousness to be able to allay Downing Street’s election fears about the political implications of the gradual abolition of GCSEs and A levels proposed by Tomlinson.

Political space can, therefore, be opened up and closed down by Government at any stage in the policy process. In terms of 14–19 reform, it was almost inevitable that in October 2004, following the publication of the Tomlinson Final Report, ministers and sections of the education state, having opened up political space in the lead up to the Report, would seek to reassert political power over the reform process. What was unforeseen, however, were the effects of a looming general election in May 2005, changes in ministers⁴ and the power of the No .10 Policy Unit in this context. The political space, which had been opened up around the A level crisis and the ensuing Tomlinson 14–19 review process, was effectively closed down with a 14–19 White Paper drafted by advisers, ministers and civil servants behind closed doors.

The White Paper, with its political compromises, reminds us of the temporary nature of political space in the English system and the limits of New Labour radicalization of policy following the A level crisis. However, the fact that the Tomlinson Report exists and represents the unifying aspirations of most sections of the education profession and some way beyond means that it can be used both as a starting point for rebuilding political space at a national level in a post-election period, and also as a vision for guiding local 14–19 innovation in the context of implementation.

Policy engagement and the role of the researcher

Our principal reason for developing the four-dimensional framework for analysing 14–19 education policy is to be able, as researchers, to assess when and how to intervene in the policy process to bring about improvements to the education system. McLaughlin (2000), for example, makes a distinction between two major activities for the education researcher—‘analysis of policy’ and ‘analysis for policy’, suggesting that academics should go beyond the traditional role of independent policy critique and enter more actively into the policy arena as advocates of change.

The four-dimensional framework for policy analysis outlined here aims to inform the process of what we term ‘policy engagement’ and is intended to be shared between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers, since we can all be regarded as wider members of the policy community. By using the framework, we seek to identify the necessary range of policies and practices which, linked together, may signal the beginnings of a new political era; the features of a more open and balanced education state and the dimensions of a more ‘deliberative’ policy process (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). We also aim to highlight opportunities for researchers and others to create and utilize political space at different levels within the education state and at different stages of the policy process.

Different points in the policy process offer varying balances of constraints and opportunities for researcher intervention, from the most critical to the most practical. Interventions may include challenging orthodoxies, creating political space, developing system thinking, working with policy memory, pointing out possible unintended policy outcomes, stimulating policy learning, developing strategy and undertaking evaluation to aid improvement. The issue is knowing when and how to act in the best interests of learners, teachers and wider society.

Such concerns lead us to suggest that as researchers we should be involved in the policy-making process from its initial conception through to its implementation and evaluation. While we recognize that there are dangers in researchers crossing the line between ‘analysis of policy’ and ‘analysis for policy’, we believe that they/we have a responsibility to play a role in the policy process as a whole. This includes a genuine engagement with both practitioners and policy-makers in relation to policy enactment. Change management within the policy process is a complex and potentially fraught activity. In our view, however, it is one where researchers can use independent research to promote ‘policy memory’ and ‘policy learning’ to both support and challenge policy enactment. Andrew Pollard (2005), Director of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme, argues for a form of professional activism based on the independence of research. In doing so, he takes issue with Judyth Sachs’ concept of ‘strategic positioning’, in which she envisages researchers working for a ‘desired future’ and not always reacting to the present (Sachs, 2000). Our concept of ‘policy engagement’, which involves different types of research intervention and, in particular, an alliance with educational practitioners, requires that researchers share with them views about ‘desired futures’ and system improvement. While supporting the principle of independent research and all that this can bring to research-based relationships, we

appear to be nearer to Sachs than to Pollard. Our idea of policy engagement also suggests the need for what Sharon Gewirtz calls ‘ethical reflexivity’ in which researchers working for policy also make explicit their value assumptions and ‘take seriously the practical judgements and dilemmas’ (Gewirtz, 2004, p. 14) of those being researched.

So far, our experience of the policy-making process in England in the sphere of 14–19 education and training suggests that researchers and practitioners will have to battle for political space inch by inch. However, if we look just beyond our borders to Wales, which until recently shared governance arrangements with England, we see how different the policy process can be, with spaces for researcher intervention being deliberately created in the interests of better and more pluralist policy-making (Daugherty *et al.*, 2000). More inclusive policy-making of this kind suggests that developing the role of education researchers in the policy process is tied up with wider political and democratic changes.

Finally, while we have not discussed here how the analytical framework we have outlined in this paper might be used to predict policy outcomes, we think it may have potential in this area. We would welcome comments on how it might be used or developed further for this purpose.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to acknowledge the generous support of the Nuffield Foundation for The Nuffield 14–19 Review of Education. This article was developed from a discussion paper for the Review. In addition, we would like to thank other members of the Review for their comments at a seminar that helped us to develop our ideas further and one of our anonymous reviewers who offered some constructive suggestions for improvement of the article before publication.

Notes

1. We are suggesting here a mutually reinforcing set of factors that together create a state of equilibrium. This concept was originally used by Finegold and Soskice in 1988 when referring to the ‘low skills equilibrium’ in England. Here, however, we use the idea to suggest the formation of a set of conditions based on deeper social and political structures, which together create a state of ideological domination.
2. The concept of policy champions is used in American politics to refer to advocates of particular areas of policy which can run across different political parties—e.g., Degregorio (1997).
3. The term ‘tipping debates’ is a reworking of ‘tipping point’, a concept popularized by Malcolm Gladwell (2002) to explain how ideas, products, messages and behaviours, facilitated by key types of communicators, can cross a threshold and achieve a critical mass. Tipping debates refer to areas of ideological contestation where fundamental debates (e.g., in the case of 14–19 education—on learning, skills, achievement and so on) can be tipped in different directions to gain professional and popular support.
4. David Miliband, a strong supporter of the unified reform perspective, was moved to the Cabinet Office and Ruth Kelly, a newcomer to education, replaced Charles Clarke as Secretary of State in 2005.

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