ARTICLE 19:

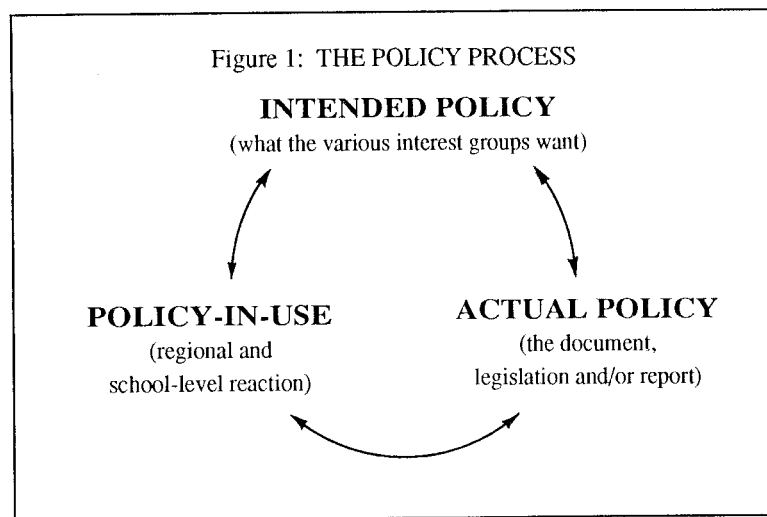## EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND POLITICAL REFORM
Stephen Crump

When teachers receive the latest policy through the mail or, at least, read about it in the newspaper, they generally feel a sense of exasperation, even despair. To classroom teachers, yet another reform is often the last straw. If teachers do have any spare time after lesson preparation, presentation and evaluation/marking, their professional interest is often directed elsewhere and many policy reports gather dust in crowded staffrooms. This comment is not a criticism of teachers. The last few decades have been a period of unrelenting reform in schools throughout the world, reforms led by shifts in political power and shifts in cultural and social values. Yet, as Wallin (1984: 79) argues, 'schools have not changed fundamentally over some decades.' We will return to some of these policies later in this article. For the moment, our concern is with the manner in which teachers respond to educational policy as it is formed, legislated and implemented.

The intention of this chapter is to demonstrate that policies are documents which teachers can pick up, read, interpret and apply in a very proactive and constructive process of contributing to the improvement of education. Though it does not always seem obvious, educational policy has immediate and far-reaching implications for teachers' careers and those who do not keep in touch with contemporary reforms might well jeopardize their prospects for promotion. Ironically, Blase (1988) found, after a searching review of the literature, that teachers are politically conservative and feel especially vulnerable and *avoid* becoming involved in reforms in case they endanger their promotion prospects. Teachers strategic responses to this feeling of vulnerability were found to be: acquiescence, conformity, ingratiation, diplomacy, passive-aggressiveness and confrontation. This is not a flattering portrait yet it reflects the situation that arose during the massive restructuring of schools in Australia during the end of the 1980s. Resentment at perceived "teacher bashing" led many teachers to become cynical and antagonistic. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, the substance of those reforms generally offered real opportunities for teachers to take control of their career options and, for example in N.S.W., to turn the "school-centred education" rhetoric of the government into local action.

Teachers and Policy Development

When we look at particular policies, we notice that there are a number of different, partially overlapping, stages they go through. In a penetrating analysis of education politics and policy making, Ball (1990a) cites these stages as:

Figure 1: THE POLICY PROCESS

INTENDED POLICY
(what the various interest groups want)

POLICY-IN-USE
(regional and
school-level reaction)

ACTUAL POLICY
(the document,
legislation and/or report)

If we think about this process of policy development and implementation, we quickly see that policies are not frozen texts; they are not immutable creeds set in tablets of stone. In the first place, a variety of interest groups have their say in drawing up and/or responding to 'green papers' - draft discussion documents presented for public comment. These interest groups then attempt to influence the wording of the final policy document, the 'white paper', through submission and/ or public hearings. Through teacher unions, as well as individual efforts, teachers have a major voice in this process, though what they say may not always be accepted.

The point is that teachers can and should influence the development of educational policy and teachers already have a number of structural positions which enable them to do this as a profession. As Ball (1990a) argues, policy is constantly shifting and is loosely coupled, that is, *policy is a process not just an end-product.* This is an advantage. Remember, however, that in the 1990s, teachers are competing with powerful interest groups in this process: employer organizations, union bodies, chamber of commerce representatives, political figures, state and federal bureaucrats and even international voices such as that of the O.E.C.D. which has produced very influential reports on the state of Australian education and its relationship to our economic problems.

An Example

The educational reforms instituted by the Liberal-National Coalition government in N.S.W. after March 1988, with Dr Terry Metherell as Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, directly expressed the need to make many of these education-economy links. The same analysis applies to the philosophical platform of other

reforms in other states with which you may be more familiar [consider some of the similarities and differences as you read this chapter and, possibly, complete Task 19]. The validity of the O.E.C.D. claims, and those of the media which echoed them, was largely left unquestioned. It seemed 'obvious' to many observers that schools were failing to produce economically productive graduates, that there were too many courses more closely related to hobbies than careers, and that - alongside indiscipline - schools were crowded with students who were unable to master the basics of spelling, arithmetic and grammar. While it is outside the scope of this article to dwell on this point, we should consider whether what was happening in the schools was *not* the consequence of increasing school-based curriculum but rather the outcome of macro socio-economic changes indicated by shifting secondary senior school populations, the restructuring of tertiary education, increasing political control of curriculum and a world-wide economic recession. Evidence for this analysis comes from the O.E.C.D. itself and its shifting support for educational fashions: reports in the early 1980s actually encouraged governments - for example in Hong Kong - to introduce S.B.C.D. (Llwellyn, 1982).

Yet that is not saying that schools in the 1980s were ideal places. Far from it! Many of the reforms proposed at federal and state level in most recent reports targeted serious deficiencies and, as in the case of the N.S.W. Scott Report, suggested innovative remedies, ones not simplistically linked to short-term economic considerations but striking at the heart of a cumbersome, outdated, unreconstructed bureaucracy. Effective policy reform for N.S.W.'s schools required radical surgery and, perhaps, we needed 'Metherellism' to change the culture of mediocrity evident in too many schools - as well as tertiary institutions. It is to Dr Metherell's credit that he oversaw the development of a blueprint to create an appropriately responsive state school system. He will enter the history books for this achievement alone. He told the author (in 1990):

> The last thing I want to suggest is that everyone in the Department of Education in 1988 was dead wood. Far from it (...) There's more talent in the administration of education, let alone schools, than there is in any other single department in N.S.W. There are some awful, awful people, too. Most of them have now departed the scene over the last couple of years. I think they just couldn't cut the pace. Their mediocrity was exposed to their colleagues and they took their early retirement. Those who have remained are, I think, by and large, pretty excited.

Educational policy and change do not have a happy history, in N.S.W. as elsewhere. Departmental officers tend to be conservative and see change as slow and incremental (Hogan & West, 1980). Officers in teacher unions also tend to be wary of reform and innovation. Before Dr Metherell's time as Minister (1988-1990), conservative individuals, promoted without external competition, working in an inefficient top-down organizational structure, managed to block the reforms

of even the most determined director-general or minister. In N.S.W., if Dr Metherell wished to carry out his election promises, he needed a more flexible and motivated department *and* a more responsive school system. Dr Metherell (1987, 1988, 1989) had promised to improve education services for people in the disadvantaged suburbs of Western Sydney; to give greater choice to parents, to promote reward for excellence in students; to develop new scope for teacher promotion; and to open schools to the community. This time, the *intended policy* was supported by a minister with a firm view on political reform and a determination to make an impact on the policy development procedures within the department and/or seeking advice from external consultants. He explained:

> I believe that you are there to carry out your promises and, secondly, that if you have thought through your policies, and they do hang together, that you should implement them. I believe in setting your policies fairly coherently and you have four years to implement that package. That's what we said we would do, and we've done [his emphasis] it and I'm immensely proud of that.

> I also believe we had a mandate. You need to ride the idealism and a sense of reform in a new government with a new mandate very hard because it doesn't last forever. (...) So that was a very conscious effort on my part and I probably saw that more strongly than anybody other than the Premier (Mr Greiner). He was as committed to it as I was (...) we shared the very strong view of the importance [his emphasis] of education, the belief that we did have the right vision for the 21st century, and the determination to do it. You need to have those three things.

There was clear perception in the first Greiner government that they would hit the ground running and get the major features of their reforms, not only educational, well established in the first years (of a 4 year period) before they needed to worry too much about a backlash from the electors. This view sprang from a quite accurate perception that most previous state and federal governments - except the first federal Whitlam Labor government - had wasted the mandate for change they had been given by the voters. It also mirrors the approach of the Thatcher government in England in the first half of the 1980s and that of the Reagan administration in the United States during the same period.

Crash or Crash Through

Metherell's commitment, a little startling to many bureaucrats, teachers and union officials at first, was judged to be blunt, aggressive and cavalier (Macpherson, 1992). It was certainly fast footwork and many major reforms were in place before the end of 1988 despite mass demonstrations in Sydney's streets. One suspects that Dr Metherell's early strategy was appropriate given the history of systemic intransigence and school-level imperviousness to genuine reform. One is re-

minded of Cassidy's (1985: 228) observation that trying to get teachers to change is like 'sweeping porridge uphill through long grass'. Again, this is not necessarily a criticism of individual teachers but more an attack on the rigid structures within which they work and the occupational culture that environment engenders. The N.S.W. Department of School Education is bigger than B.H.P. - Australia's largest private corporation - making it one of the largest centralized education bureaucracies in the world (Macpherson, 1990). The Scott Report (1989) argued this high degree of centralization came at a price.

> *The inflexibility of the Department's structures and procedures has made it unresponsive to the real educative needs of students and teachers. (Scott, 1990: xiii)*

This analysis tends towards 'qualitative interpretism' in which the plural subjective realities of different groups are identified and traced to the oppressive nature of 'the System' (Macpherson, 1990). I would prefer to argue for a more pragmatic mode of theory, one which accounts for the problem-solving which predates the *intended policy*, for the interactions between various education cultures during formulation of *actual policy*, and for the strategies embarked upon during the phase of *policy-in-use*.

Pragmatic Policy Development

The NSW Scott Report's 'School-Centred Education' is a good example by which to judge the worth of this approach. If we strip away the hysteria and the posturing that marked much of the educational debate during 1988-90, we are able to see that the N.S.W. Teachers' Federation was particularly reactionary and preferred to ignore the opportunities provided for its members to play a role in constructing *intended policy*; though, of course, many individual teachers did just that. Scott conducted a wide-ranging reconnaissance of the department and schools in order to establish a program of research, consultation and analysis *before* publishing any recommendations. This program included a round of interviews and group discussions, visits to Head Office, regional offices and individual schools; a systematic search of relevant reports, literature and documents; identifying necessary statistical and financial data; workshops; and analysis of nearly 400 public submissions on aspects of the Terms of Reference. Likewise, there were also approximately 1,000 submissions (Excellence & Equity 1989: 5) to the Ministry on the "Curriculum Discussion Paper" !

Macpherson (1992), who served in Scott's core group for six months, provides a unique insight into how *intended policy* becomes *actual policy*. He recalls how Scott selected a team of specialists to extend his abilities, test his assumptions and set aside redundant or irrelevant knowledge. The team added to Scott's conceptual, strategic and political analyzes in an atmosphere which tolerated conjecture, refutation, ambiguity and paradox.

Scott had to present the above process in a comparatively simplistic model in order to market the intended policy so that the intended and actual policy might fuse into the policy-in-use. He did this very effectively by presenting the department as a top-heavy triangle (Scott, 1989: 8,9) which he wanted turned upside down so that schools themselves, rather than Head Office, might become the focus of decision-making.

Policy Formation is a Multi-faceted Process

We have established that the construction of any social or economic policy is a multi-faceted process. This is true for every stage. The generation of *intended policy* involves a variety of competing ideologies that seek to affect each policy. For example, during the late Eighties, the development of educational policy - in all Australian states regardless of the political party in power - was conspicuously subjected to views from the New Right, views which saw schools as a market place characterized by competition, choice, diversity and market-driven (private and government) funding (Chitty, 1989). Even though these characteristics are not genuinely true for the economic arena, the New Right successfully put this 'economic rationalist' view so that it dominated educational, philosophical, moral or religious perspectives. In England, a 'New Liberalism' gave support to the above view, arguing that market forces unleash creativity and entrepreneurialism needed to solve the problems of rapid social and technological change (Ball, 1990a). Even sections of the Left accepted the need for 'excellence' as a policy goal, recognizing the failure of the 1970s and 1980s to alleviate educational disadvantage; the Hawke Labor government re-introduced fees for tertiary education following a similar analysis of policy.

We will not dwell on *actual policy* as the ingredients differed from state to state in Australia, though the final product - indeed across the Western world - was much the same. In N.S.W., it was the Scott Report (organization), the Carrick Report and the "Excellence & Equity" document (curriculum). In other states, the Gilding Inquiry (South Australia), the Blackburn report (Victoria), the Beazley Report and the McGaw Report (Western Australia), the "Secondary Education:The Future" Report (Tasmania), the Steinle Report (A.C.T.) and the "Education 2000" Report and the Brady reforms (Queensland). Nationally, there has been the Commonwealth Schools Commission's "In The National Interest", the "Teacher Quality" Report and moves towards a national curriculum. In England, policy reform centred on the "Education Reform Act" (1988); in the United States, it derived from the "A Nation At Risk" Report, and in New Zealand it was the Picot Report.

The main thing to remember about *actual policy* is that it is never a precise document; rather, policies have 'spaces' and contradictions which can be exploited by those involved with *policy-in-use*. For example, while the N.S.W. government presented their reforms in a fairly comprehensive and coherent package [The Carrick Report, The Scott Report, The "Excellence & Equity" document and the "Education Reform Act 1990 No. 8"] there were gaps, spaces and contradictions

which provide plenty of room to out-manoeuvre the worst features of the intended policy. First, the four parcels were developed over a two year period and, as a consequence, reflected shifting emphases and the growing maturity of the government's vision for education. However, this also means that there are inconsistencies and contradictions between the first and the last documents. This phenomenon has also been noted for England, a situation Ranson (1990) attributes to the shifting politics and government of school reorganizations.

Second, not all the key players go by the government's rules. In N.S.W., while Scott followed closely his terms of reference, he was anxious to produce a policy which was based on a 5-10 year implementation time-line. He did not want to be seen to have a party-political agenda which would consign the policy to oblivion if the Greiner government lost office, as it nearly did in May, 1991. One can gauge that this approach was successful given the Opposition's acceptance of the Report. Even the Carrick Report (1989), headed by an ex-Liberal federal politician who might be expected to be sympathetic to the Greiner/Metherell policy intentions, took unexpected directions (into early childhood education) and publicly opposed the government's strong stand on placing the Tertiary Entrance Score on the actual Higher School Certificate. (pp.79-90; 175) In addition, the Education Reform Act (1990) includes nearly 150 amendments moved by the Labor Party and Australian Democrats. These are just a few examples on how *intended policy* can be seen as a loosely connected conglomerate of ideas and how *actual policy* is, thus, something teachers can approach as a resource rather than a holy relic.

Policy Leads to a Variety of Problem-solving Responses

If we understand that policy development is a multi-faceted process, we soon realize that actual policies are capable of more than one interpretation. In an organization, the size of education, policy is open to interpretation in *all parts* of the system.

Figure 2: PROBLEMS FOR POLICY-IN-USE

- **There are gaps, spaces and contradictions;**
- **It is filtered, interpreted and recontextualized;**
- **It is opposed, contested and resisted;**
- **Interpretations are constantly shifting;**
- **Interpretations reside in different power bases;**
- **Policies are loosely coupled within and between specific examples.**

The significance for teachers of policy being open to interpretation in all parts of the system is that they can then use policy as a micro-political *resource*. Teachers - and pupils and parents - should feel free to interpret, re-interpret and apply policy to their particular social and educational contexts - their local neighbourhoods and schools. Ultimately, teachers deliver policy. Policy, therefore, reflects the responses of practitioners to *intended* and *actual* policy to the peculiarities and particularities of their school. Brown (1990) argues that, in the process of decentralization and establishing school-based management, schools need to be flexible, not only in the way they accommodate immediate needs, but also in the way they take initiatives. Thus, recent educational reforms need not be seen solely as another example of the increasing state control of education. Though this may be true on the surface, it is a mistake for teachers to retreat, surrender or hide their heads in the sand. Policy does not unproblematically filter down to the classroom intact. Ball depicted the same phenomenon in England, depicting the 'Education Reform Act' for England as:

> the product of a set of complex compromises and coercive interventions and its formation, writing, progress and, latterly, implementation, constitute a field of dispute and conflict in which interpretations and control are contested. (Ball, 1990b: 133)

Teachers, pupils, parents, members of the local community, sometimes even employers, *contest and resist* what they judge to be misinformed or ill-conceived policy. In recent case studies, this resistance has been observed to be constructive, opening up opportunities in schools which may not have arisen without the policy. This is an interesting tension: despite sophisticated efforts to see policy faithfully applied at the school level, the N.S.W. reforms were consciously and unconsciously *recontextualized* in the process of implementation.

While each policy is expected to create new conditions in schools, these new conditions might also include unintended consequences, ones which might surprise the initial decision-makers. One example, from England, is that curriculum reform intended to return schools to the basics has, quite unintentionally, led to the formation of a group Ball (1990b: 136) terms 'new progressivism', science and mathematics teachers who argue *against* the trends and *for* a problem-solving approach to teaching content. That is, school-level deliberations surrounding the implementation of a restrictive and anachronistic 'national curriculum' allowed the possibility for expressing opposing educational views which assert instead problem-solving, investigation and application. It is significant that this progressive view of pedagogy is now championed in maths and science subject areas, ones previously noted for rote learning and little classroom interaction. This will ensure that the issue will remain a hot topic throughout the 1990s.

A second example comes from N.S.W. where, during a staff development day to inservice the government's new "Fair Discipline Code" [FDC], teachers at a school I'll name "Minesville" argued against the policy's bias towards punish-

ment. They instituted a number of amendments to the policy which stressed rewarding positive behaviour and characteristics in students. Thus, from the government's point of view, the outcome of the discussion was unexpected: rather than affirming the punishment-oriented values implicit in the FDC, these teachers modified the school's procedures so that there were mechanisms for rewarding pupils and, thus, for building self-esteem. Across the state, while the "Fair Discipline Code" was designed to encourage the re-introduction of corporal punishment (caning) and instil patriotism, combined meetings of teachers and parents overwhelmingly voted against the cane and against daily flag waving ceremonies. These teachers took the government's rhetoric of 'school-centred education' and transformed it into action not quite in the way expected by the conservative political party which conceived the idea.

The preceding analysis suggests optimism for the future. It is a sound analysis based on extensive longitudinal research in N.S.W., (Crump, 1990d), England, (Ball, 1990a; 1990b) and the U.S.A. (Apple, 1986). It is an analysis which understands that we are dealing with a very complex issue and that there can be no single ideal process, strategy or explanation. It also recognizes that this analysis contains its own values basis, just as the policies do themselves. The initiation of new educational policy, almost by definition, entails conflict between powerful vested interests within schools and between different levels of education and the system. However, teachers *should* be optimistic, they *should* be willing to take risks, they *should* be prepared to conject, refute, elaborate and philosophize on educational policy. Wallin (1984) has demonstrated that the 'simple imposition conception' of the policy process, as often held by politicians and high officials, is purely illusory. Teachers can and do bargain over policy directives and synthesize policy directives on the strength of their professional knowledge and teaching experience. When this occurs, they turn their school culture into one supportive of a vibrant organization, one where the staff have a commitment to determine the fate of the school, one which has clear goals, one which manages through empowerment rather than top-down authority, one with collaborative horizontal relations, one with high expectations of pupils and one where parents are involved.

Reflections

First, let me qualify the comments made so far in this chapter by stating that it is not only where policy is recontextualized - changed to suit the school community - that progressive reform occurs. While it is generally true that teachers have used their common sense to sort out which aspects of policy to work hardest at - given that they cannot do it all at once - in many situations, teachers have been credibly proactive in taking the policy directive and changing their school for the better, often in the face of quite powerful restraints. While openly critical of many oppressive aspects of teachers' occupational cultures, I am full of a sense of wonder at what many teachers - increasingly in cahoots with their students and local community - strive for and achieve 'against all odds'.

There *is* a very large 'grey area' where policy making stops and implementation begins. If teachers - in tandem with their school community - set out to exploit this situation by participating in policy development, legitimation and practice, then they are serving the interests of their pupils better than merely reacting to policy announcements as if they were predetermined, unalterable and the outcome inevitable. When teachers initiate change, negotiate shared views, and use policy as a resource for innovation at the school level, then the education of their pupils is more likely to be a positive, challenging and rewarding experience. A school climate supportive of this approach should improve acceptance of responsibility for decisions, risk-taking, self-confidence and job satisfaction (Hayes & Ross, 1989), not only in teachers but also in their pupils. This will be a school marked by trust rather than control.

In bargaining and persuading their way through the reform agenda, these teachers will have to be careful not to become embroiled in the organizational impetus for stability rather than change. In the 1990s, there is broad policy support for reform. This view accepts that much of this policy is neither benevolent nor benign; however, it creates a context in which progressive decisions can be taken by those at school-level. I am convinced that this is the one aspect of policy which does not change; something you can test in your own career.