Muddying the water: public policymaking and educational practice

Yvonne Hillier, University of Brighton, UK

Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

Introduction
The mantra of the economic imperatives of globalisation has been sorely tested with the recent economic down turn. One consequence of recession is unemployment and lifelong learning can play an important role in helping people find ways back into work or keep the jobs they have. Government educational policy for adults is a response to other intractable social problems and the deep and ongoing need to keep people healthy and safe within a societal structure.

Three components of policy, practice and research are necessary for careful policymaking and implementation but their different timescales and cultures often lead to tension and subversion. This paper draws upon three separate areas of my practice: adult literacy and numeracy, further education and work based learning. Policymaking could and should be seen as a problem solving approach that is fraught with tension. Much decision making by policy makers is limited simply because the discourses used by different stakeholders muddy the water.

Models of policymaking
Early models of policy making assumed that people behaved rationally, identifying what needed to be done and finding solutions which would then be implemented through the process of creating a policy or a scheme of action to ensure that what was intended could actually be carried out. This technical and rational way to deal with complex problems was initially described and encouraged by Simon (1957) and Lindblom (1959) although it doesn’t always work in reality. Hogwood and Gunn (1984) identified a series of stages that policies go through where forces influence how likely an issue is noticed and becomes important enough to be implemented. Examination of how well a policy is implemented is still the ‘weakest link’ of the policy cycle. Anyone involved in the post-compulsory sector will be familiar with policy overload, where it is ‘raining policy’ (Hillier and Jameson, 2003) or more accurately today, where there is a deluge! Hardly does one policy become enacted then another is created and implemented, superseding the earlier policy and making it hard to attribute any changes to an individual policy. This frenetic initiative and policy implementation is an example of muddying the water.
Policy analysts also discuss the way in which people name and frame issues and their position within the structures of society from the macro level of global politics down to the micro level of individual action through discourse analysis. The recent rise of government ‘glossy’ publications which contain pictures of everyday people doing everyday things shows how far the influence of public relations or ‘spin’ has reached. Policies written twenty years ago use different language and presentation.

I have been influenced by Hajer and Wagenaar’s (2003) approach to policy analysis, deliberative policy making (DPA) which demonstrates how messy policy making is, given that it has to deal with issues that are framed and understood differently by the various stakeholders involved. DPA acknowledges tensions that inevitably occur between these stakeholders and their beliefs and their model demonstrates policy making as an activity and analysis should focus on this action. This view accords with a social practice approach in adult literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN) focusing on the activities involved in their social contexts.

ALLN is a prime example where policy making has been influenced by an issue reaching the agenda and is now a central plank of government economic policy, because the issue of literacy, or more accurately, low levels of literacy and numeracy are seen in the context of economic activity and contribution to the economic success of countries. The UK is not alone in this interest and the issue reached the agenda as a result of international surveys of adult literacy (IALS) from the mid 1990s onwards. A low ranking in levels of adult literacy compared with other industrialised nations has provided a huge incentive for many nation states to create and implement policies to combat and improve low levels of these basic skills.

**Evidence based policy making**

The current UK government and its immediate predecessor draws upon evidence to inform the policy making process. The life cycle of governments demand quick fixes and solutions to the problem or issue. The tendency to create policies as ‘knee jerk’ reactions to problems is not new but with the wealth of data collected and recorded through the rise of information technology, it is possible to seek evidence and decide on action with increasingly short timescales. Critics of this process argue that the reverse is occurring, ie that it is policy based evidence that is being created. The issue has already been identified, an appropriate solution politically has been created but evidence is required to point in the same direction as the policy.

There is research well used by policy makers. The set of cohort longitudinal studies hold an enormous wealth of information about groups of people who were born in a particular period. The first of these is the National Child Development Survey (NCDS). In this cohort, all those born in one week in March 1958 became part of the cohort. This initial group of approximately
17000 individuals still contains 12000 people and information about their lives has been systematically gathered in sweeps over the past 50 years.

We know much about this cohort, We know what kind of families they were born into, their siblings, where they lived, what kind of housing, their health, their early development, how well they did at school, what qualifications they gained when they left and what occupations they have, how much they are paid, their relationships, if they have had children and now grandchildren. We know about their health, wealth and to some extent what they think about their situation today.

Subsequent cohorts have been created to take account of the changing population in the UK, given that in 1958 the level of immigration was far lower than it is today. There is a 1970 British Cohort Study, and a 2000 Millenium Cohort.

A study by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) used the British Cohort study of 1970 and concluded that poor literacy in adulthood is strongly linked to poor skills development in childhood. It showed that children whose parents had low levels of literacy were likely to have low levels themselves (Bynner and Parsons, 2008) but we shouldn’t assume that because there is a link that there is a cause, ie that low levels of literacy cause poverty or unemployment. Yet government policymaking has clearly drawn upon these links to inform its decision to take action.

Reading the adult literacy policies from 1999 onwards, when Sir Claus Moser was asked to lead a committee on the situation of adult literacy, language and numeracy in the country (Moser, 1999), we can see that NCDS evidence featured strongly, along with the IALS data. We read that one in seven adults has a problem with their basic skills. This figure derives partly from testing of a subsection of the full NCDS cohort in 1981. This contrasts with an earlier figure of one million people having trouble with literacy in the 1970s when the extrapolation came from school leaving data. This quantification of the problem became part of the solution ie the scale of the problem led to certain kinds of solution. In the 1970s, the solution was to create a cadre of volunteers to work with individuals, not be possible with the scale of the issue identified by the 1990s.

There is nothing wrong with drawing upon such data but the conclusion that is reached is susceptible to the influence of the views of the stakeholders as Hajer and Wagenaar argue

Practitioners of ‘very different plumage wrestle with conflict, power, uncertainty and unpredictability. Solutions are not so much formulated as arrived at, haltingly, tentatively, through acting upon the situation at hand and through the application of practical wisdom in negotiating concrete situations… (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003:19)
Research based evidence
My research over the past twenty years in education and training has examined public policymaking in adult literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN), work based learning (WBL) and the workforce in the further and adult education sector in England. These areas often interlink, for example, many adult literacy practitioners are hourly paid and most are women. Delivery of basic skills is partly in the workplace. Foundation degrees have been developed to increase levels of skills and knowledge but attract learners who would not be considered ‘traditional’ entrants to higher education. I am interested in how practitioners are influenced by national and international policies and how research can help practitioners accommodate their practice and use their own agency to challenge policies which affect this practice. In an ideal world, policy makers would be able to develop their practice of policymaking through collaboration and understanding of the perspectives of practitioners and researchers who ask questions and encourage reflection upon what happens and why. I have also argued with Jill Jameson (2003) that practitioners are empowered by becoming involved in research and by knowing what is happening in the wider policy sense informs practice (Hillier 2006). In the following section, I will briefly summarise how my research has been contextualised in the overlapping spheres of research, policy and practice.

Public policymaking in ALLN
In our examination of the policy of ALLN, Mary Hamilton and I were struck by how often the issue became part of different social policies. For example, in the 1980s when there was huge unemployment, the link between low levels of basic skills and vulnerability to unemployment was striking and government invested time and effort through policies to combat unemployment rather than addressing literacy and numeracy specifically. Ironically, the current recession is providing a new but familiar policy environment where unemployed people will need to compete with qualified and experienced peers for fewer job opportunities.

We applied five lenses in our analysis of the past three decades of adult literacy:
Time
Discourse
Agency
Tension
Deliberative Spaces

Two of the lenses are briefly summarised here. The first lens, time, was used to identify four key phases:
**Phases**

1. Literacy Campaign led by a coalition of voluntary agencies with a media partner, the BBC
2. Provision developed substantially, supported by Local Education Authority Adult Education Services and voluntary organizations, with leadership, training and development funding from a national agency (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, ALBSU, later the Basic Skills Agency, BSA). The MSC and the EU were important sources of funding
3. Depletion of LEA funding and control, basic skills given statutory status through a more formalized further education (FE) system, dependent on funding through a national funding body, the FEFC
4. Development of Skills for Life policy: New government strategy unit created, £1.5 billion of government money is committed.

**Agency**

Agency was a fruitful lens to use in our research. We captured the stories of practitioners and policy makers as well as a small sample from the NCDS cohort. We showed how people were affected by government policies. For example, during the severe funding cuts in the 1980s, learners and practitioners campaigned together, holding ‘teach ins’ and marching on town halls to make their voices heard.

We also showed how literacy, language or numeracy practice also was influenced by the policy context. Funding was a hugely important influence on this practice and we noted how canny organisers drew down funding from a variety of sources depending on the income streams available at the time. Indeed, the creativity of organisers and managers at showing how improving ALLN could fit within a wide variety of funding criteria is something to be celebrated as it kept provision going when policymakers were not recognising the issue of basic skills within their agenda.

It is difficult to tell how far practitioners have influenced policymaking. They certainly do at a local level but increasingly, with central government overseeing the education and training programmes across all ages in the population, and given the current target driven climate of accountability, practitioners voices are seldom loud enough to be heard in the policy noise. Yet deliberative spaces do exist through the networks and events organised by for example, NRDC in England.

**Public policymaking in workbased learning**

An experiment in learning launched in 2000 was the creation of foundation degrees (FDs) to provide higher level technical and professional skills for people in the workplace who had not yet gained appropriate higher level qualifications. The central tenet of the FD was to engage employers in the design, delivery and assessment of learning in these degrees. Recent figures by HEFCE (2008) show how much FDs have become part of the further and
higher education landscape, given that the majority are delivered in the FE sector.

My research evaluated one of the prototype FDs in Public Service Management (Hillier and Rawnsley 2008). We wanted to know how far the programme had met the initial objectives set by government along with the effect completion of the award was having on employers and their employees who had been students of the FD.

We identified important successes where learners gained confidence, knowledge and understanding which they were using in everyday practice. We found employers were largely supportive of the involvement of their employees and they identified the positive effect the programme had on their employees’ ability to function professionally.

We also identified the difficulty in engaging employers as active members of learning in the workplace. We questioned how well the aims of the FD were meeting the notion that employers play a central role in the up-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce. Our findings the concerns continued to be raised by Ewart Keep (see the report of the Select Committee, on Leitch 2009) about how government policy continues to assume that employers can and will be involved in the fostering of skills as set out by the Leitch Report in 2006.

Public policymaking for practitioners working in the learning and skills sector

My third example comes from a collaborative research project funded by the then Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) for the regional Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) which brings together practitioners and researchers to engage in, disseminate and use research on, for and by the sector. We wanted to know what conditions of employment and opportunities for development were experienced by hourly paid and part time staff in the sector. There had been a large casualisation of staff following incorporation of FE in 1993. Recent European legislation required all staff to enjoy the same conditions of service and we wanted to know how far this had percolated into colleges and institutions.

We drew upon national, regional and local data as well as surveying over 2000 staff in five institutions in London and the South East. We suggested in our initial report (Hillier and Jameson, 2004) that staff will do anything to protect their learners’ experiences, even though they had very few facilities as staff. We noted that they did not seem to know what they were entitled to in relation to holiday and sick pay, for example. When we examined the data again in 2006 we reframed our data in terms of professionalism comprising individual agency and the influence of the institutional ethos. (Hillier and Jameson, 2006, Jameson and Hillier, 2008)
Has this research influenced practice and policy? One researcher from an adult education service changed her induction process as a result of the information disaggregated at institutional level. This is an example of local policymaking which is influential through touching the lives of practitioners directly.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that social policymaking is inherently problematic, given that it has to try to resolve complex problems with limited resources. I have also suggested that the nature of the issue or problem is also highly contested and that people are inundated with policies and initiatives in the Learning and Skills Sector in England. However, I have also shown that individual agency is an important factor in how policies are implemented and that it is possible to influence what happens if people are aware of what policies can do and if they are prepared to use their agency and autonomy. The sector is full of people who are dedicated to their learners and it is this characteristic which fills me with hope when the next policy comes our way.

**References**


DIUS (2009) Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee - First Report Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies

This document was added to the Education-Line database on 26 June 2009