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CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL POLICY ANALYSIS: a discussion of perspectives

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Abstract

Education policy is the medium through which society and educational institutions interact. Currently major policy thrusts of devolution and participation are being promoted within the educational community. It becomes essential that these policies be analysed and evaluated by educators. This paper supports the role of radical humanist perspective in the development of a critical model of educational policy analysis, and stresses the necessity for teacher educators to expose student teachers to critical and radical perspectives.

Policy is one of those things that everybody knows and recognises, but which nobody can precisely define. However, it is, as John Prunty (1984) suggests, about intentions.

In the large, government controlled, bureaucratically organised social apparatus of public education, policy is the expression of the prevailing political groupings ideas of what should be the scope, form and nature of education. Policies are explicit and implicit statements of value. In defining directions, allocating resources, including and excluding segments of society, ordering priorities, and setting goals, policies encapsulate a notion of what ought to be, according to the particular values of the formulating body.

Policies not only indicate intention but also presume application. It could be argued, and Sir Humphrey Appleby of 'Yes Minister' fame would probably agree, that policy making is a symbolic and rhetorical activity in which politicians engage as a self sufficient and self perpetuating exercise. However in a less pessimistic perspective of the processes of government of society, policy implementation is presumed as a necessary corollary to policy formulation.

Given this presumption, one could assume that it would be of import to analyse and evaluate policy and its implementation. Various justifications can be given for this exercise.

We live in an imperfect world by our own judgements, full of imperfect practices, institutions and occurrences. It is this imperfection which necessitates policy, for policy, which describes a more desired social state, is the child of dissatisfaction. Thus, the degree to which policy contributes

towards a less imperfect world, needs to be adjudged, not only for its own utility, but for the purpose of formulating future intentions.

Policy is, as stated, an expression of values by a politically dominant group. In a democracy, political structure and political actions are held to be accountable to the electorate. Policy and implementation as overtly political expressions should be analysed and evaluated in ways which render them accessible for the purposes of public accountability.

Consequently policy formulation, implementation and analysis can be seen as a cyclic and recurring process in a society's attempts to refine and improve its practices.

However, policy analysis is as problematic an area as is policy itself. As Young (1982, p.1) states –

The evaluation of policy is a complex task and there is not likely to be any set of readily available criteria upon which particular policies may be judged once and for all.

This is not surprising for given the absence of any universally recognised absolute values, and the lack of a readily accessible omnipotent being to administer judgement, analysis must be made according to the ever changing kaleidoscope of human and social values and consequently and inevitably must reflect a particular perspective. Thus, as White (1982, p.125) reiterates, 'Policy evaluation is not a neutral academic exercise, but is inherently political.'

The particular perspective adopted in policy analysis is consequently crucial to the nature of its findings.

Educational policy formulation is an exercise in problem setting and solving. Rein and Schon (1984) describe the problem setting in terms of a process of 'framing'. This framing allows decision makers to select out and define a coherent concept of the problem area and its implications. Frames serve both an explanatory and normative function, creating the conceptual understanding which both clarifies the problem, and implies the solution.

The concept of framing can also be applied to the area of educational policy analysis, to the extent that whilst a large variety of approaches to this problem exist, there may be defined a smaller number which may be associated with particular conceptual frames or underlying theories. Prunty (1984) isolates six particular approaches to policy analysis as being 'a fair and representative sampling of current thought about policy.' Five of these approaches he classifies as being derived from a particular functionalist paradigm.

This paradigm, which can also be described as scientific positivism scientism or scientific determinism, is 'based on the assumption that society has a concrete, real existence and a systematic character oriented to produce an

ordered and regulated state of affairs.' (Morgan, 1980, p.608). The sixth approach, termed by Prunty (1984) and Smith (1982) as being derived from critical theory, is grounded in human values, accepts society as contradictory and problematic, and as Prunty (1984, p. 15) describes "stands in direct opposition to the functionalist paradigm with its subjectionist assumptions about reality, and its commitment to social change."

Consequently any discussion of approaches to policy analysis must initially examine the paradigmatic opposition of functionalism and critical theory, in terms of their suitability as conceptual frame bases in the task of educational policy analysis.

Functionalism is the basis for an approach to the study of social phenomena commonly termed 'scientific'. This approach assumes an objective knowable world which the social scientist can examine such as to isolate universalities of structure and process. It assumes that society exists as a discrete entity with characteristics specific to its separate existence. Consequently the individual is examined as a social component, and the scientist seeks to understand *how*, not *why*, society is structured.

This study is presumed to be from the objective perspective of the disinterested scientific observer, who focuses on the quantifiable aspects of the phenomena and is therefore presumed to be value neutral.

Social theory based on such methodology and premises is also presumed to be value neutral and objective, and concerns itself with what is, rather than with what should be. Such theory presumes a stability and self-regulatory function in the nature of society such that the individual is subject to its deterministic demands.

As a paradigmatic basis for approaches to educational policy analysis, functionalism would seem to pose several weaknesses.

No one can deny the usefulness of the scientific method to the present state of man's knowledge of his environment. However this method was developed as an investigative approach to a range of phenomena in which man was either an external observer, or a minor or peripheral participant. When the method is applied to social phenomena, in which man is the fundamental participant, the capacity for any sense of detachment disappears, and subjectivity must be presumed. Given the social contrivance of organised schooling, and the disparity of opinion as to its need, forms and processes, the scientific objectivity-value neutral presumptions of functionalism would seem to be markedly inappropriate.

Further, the interactional nature of education, and the interpersonal dimension of its processes, would seem to lend credence to Knight's (1982, p.31) observation that 'The nature of humanness denies the possibility of a scientific sociology.' That this is so, appears to be reinforced by the observation that no functionalist based approach to educational policy

analysis has evolved - all have been borrowed, either piecemeal or entire, from other disciplines, particularly the natural sciences.

As earlier stated, policy, by its very existence, admits an imperfect state of social arrangements. Policy is consequently about change and the range of possibilities. Functionalism however, by presuming a discrete social entity, limits the possibilities of change to the amelioration of disfunction within the entity, and to the adjustment of individuals and/or social segments towards the achievement of an 'optimum' social state, determined by the society, and according to some yet to be discovered and quantified social laws and principles.

"At various times, in various cultures, particular ways of framing experience become powerful, become, in effect, ideas in good currency" (Rein and Schon, 1984, p.60). The scientific frame is immensely strong in our culture, to such an extent that it is referred to as the "Ideology of Scientific Positivism" (Prunty, (1984). Our culture is littered with the white coated iconography of scientific belief, and our social structures, including educational structures, are derived from a boundless belief in the omnipotent veracity of the application of its ceremonies, dogma and forms.

It has been argued in various ways by a significant number of social and educational critics - Bordieu, (1974), Bernstein, (1977), Young, (1979), Bowles and Gintis, (1979), that the ideology of scientific positivism not only permeates our social edifices, but maintains the political and economic status quo, therefore assuring the perpetuation of the capitalist mode of inequalities of wealth, ownership, production and allocation, and consequent social inequalities. Hence, educational policy emanating from such a scientifically normative society would reflect those values, and, if the criticisms of its ideology and implications are sustained, would perpetuate social stasis rather than facilitate the process of change.

To analyse the educational policy of blatantly scientific society using approaches based on a consistent framework of functionalism is a contradiction in terms, as such an exercise must exclude any critical function. It would seem far more useful to examine such policy using an approach inconsistent with the prevailing paradigm. Only then can a critical analysis take place.

Prunty (1984) proposes the radical humanist as an appropriate basis for a critical approach to policy analysis. He suggests several salient advantages inherent in such a basis.

It is apparent that such a critical theory approach to educational policy analysis is in its formative stages. It is of note that this approach is derived from, related to, and intended for, educational practices, and consequently would seem more appropriate than the second-hand borrowings of the functionalist persuasion.

The approach is also humanist, centring on the individual as the fundamental basis for society, which, far from having a discrete life, merely represents the gathered acts and intentions of the individuals who comprise it. Society, therefore, rather than being confined by its limitations, is instead an expression of human possibilities, and hence change is an integral, rather than aberrative aspect of the nature of society. Further, a radical critical theory which entertains the possibilities of change in many and varied directions, and indeed in the very nature of the society itself, would seem a more appropriate basis for the analysis of policy - which, after all, represents, or purports to represent change.

Finally, and most importantly, the radical humanist paradigm represents a different frame of reference from that of functionalism. As Rein and Schon (1984, p.70) suggest 'Alternate problem frameworks facilitate a dialectic between perspectives and this makes it more possible to spell out and manage the dilemmas which are inherent in social policies.' The weaknesses in policy can never be discerned by applying a related and supportive mode of analysis. Such analysis would be confined to cosmetic fine tuning, with no questioning of the basic premises on which the policy was based.

Examination of the functionalist based approaches would seem to support Prunty's (1984) contention that they were inappropriate.

All profess to be value neutral. However, implicit within all approaches are the values of the prevailing ideology, and the values of social determination resultant from this. Such values are obviously supportive of the political and economic status quo, thus the values of capitalist mode of social and economic organisation are necessarily evoked.

All profess to be able to take an objective approach to the social and individual values involved in policy decisions. Such a stance is deluded as it denies the humanity of the observer - who by definition, is no observer but a participant in the human society he purports to examine. No one who has lived and participated in a society can be untouched by its array of values, and objectivity is hence a myth, and an expression of dishonesty to oneself and the social audience.

All approaches assume that man is a logical creature. I would not deny this, but suggest that logic is but one of the myriad capacities of man. Man is also an emotional creature, with feelings, reactions and impulses which defy rational explanation but which are an intricate and causative part of his social behaviour. To deny this aspect of man, and to grant to decision makers, analysts, or social actors a one-dimensionality is to grant to man an understanding of himself he obviously does not have. Anyone who viewed the television programme 'The Human Brain' (ABC, Feb/March, 1984) would realise how little man knows about the cause of his actions. To base analytical approaches on the assumption of scientifically predictable action, is at least, misguided.

A common definition of change is shared by all functionalist approaches. Change is seen as incremental, as something which affects parts, but not the whole. Consequently such change is consistent with a shared notion of social system tending towards equilibrium – maintaining a steady state. Change is therefore gradual, and the stability of society subsumes the capacity of any individual to affect it.

This notion is shattered by history. Social revolution occurs, not as an aberration, but as an undeniable mode of social change. Policy can provide, or promote this revolution. Further, individuals have, by their personalities and actions, affected the course and nature of societies and social institutions. Again, such actions occur so frequently that they must be seen as usual. To account for such phenomena as deviance is to blatantly ignore the evidence.

However, the greatest condemnation of functionalist approaches would seem to come from their inability to incorporate a review of what could be. There emanates from the exponents of scientific positivism a smug satisfaction with the presumption that inevitable understanding of the underlying social principles will occur, and presumably, as with all other scientific knowledge acquired by man, this will be used to control and regulate society to create a 'brave new world'. This is a view of what 'must be' a socially deterministic, materially affluent, spiritually devoid world, bereft of choice and free will and possibilities.

The critical analysis approach seeks to present an alternative to these prevailing models of analysis. It is value explicit, presenting a 'vision of a moral order where justice, equality and individual freedom are uncompromised by the avarice of a few'. Prunty (1984, p.42). As such it proposes a vision of social possibilities not necessarily related to present circumstances. It is fundamentally critical, accepting nothing as sacrosanct least of all itself. As Young (1982, p.20) describes

The criterion for judging the process of judging policy is whether the process of judgement was itself open to rational possibilities.

Critical analysis also seeks to avoid the one way communication inherent in top-down policy, by including participants from all areas of policy involvement on an equal footing basis. Such communication would be expected to facilitate emancipation of oppressed by allowing them input into policy procedures, and also informing them of the manner of their oppression. Critical analysis consequently seeks to subvert existing social arrangements by promoting consciousness of the situations of oppressed groups and the methods by which oppression is maintained. This is consistent with its aim of creating a praxis – a coalescing of thought and action – in which social theorising arises from, and is immediately concerned with, social action.

This concern for action creates the need for a further dimension to critical theory – the need to recognise and work within the political and social realities such as to achieve, in a real sense, its theoretical possibilities.

At this stage it would seem timely to raise an issue crucial to the argument for critical theory as a more suitable basis for policy analysis than functionalist based approaches. The pragmatic exponent of a critical theory approach must realise that, unless violent revolution or similar occurs, he/she must work through, and with, existing educational arrangements. Smith (1982) examines the problem of radical or critical ideas gaining a hearing, much less any application, in educational policymaking. In examining the fate of past attempts to incorporate such material, he concludes that "In relation to 'radical' work, then, . . . its status is hardly likely to ensure its inclusion on a policy agenda" (p. 145). There would seem to be an enormous gulf between the currency of ideas exchanged at an academic level, and those in vogue in actual school policy. It seems a supreme irony that the rational notion of a just and equitable world can be dominated by the irrational belief in a scientifically rational world.

Consequently, it behoves teacher educators to critically assess the nature of the experiences which they present to student teachers.

If the world of education is portrayed as a given, controlled, and planned, logical arrangement, in which the teachers are actors rather than creators, then the dynamic nature of the reality is being denied, and students are being cossetted into a comfort which emphasises the pleasures of routine.

Given the chill winds of economic and social reality sweeping through our tertiary institutions, it would seem essential that student teachers be exposed to perspectives which not only allow them to critically evaluate their own experiences, but which provide them with a basis for establishing future educational priorities.

Only a critical study of educational policy emphasises the potential for alternatives, and indicates the role teachers, as fundamental creators of educational reality, play in educational policy.

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FOUNDATION STUDIES AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Introduction

A review of the literature shows that most educators agree with two principles underlying most points of view with regard to multicultural education. These are:

- The right of children to identify with a particular culture within the broader context of Australian society.
- The need to educate all children not only towards a degree of tolerance and understanding of other cultures, but also to appreciate that it can be profitable to accommodate some of the points of view of other cultures.

Few educators would disagree with these principles. But the principles themselves provide little guidance with regard to appropriate content and strategies for teachers. The question of how to translate guiding principles, aims or values into practice is complex. In some areas, such as 'mathematics' and 'literacy', clearly articulated aims all but define content and time allocation for the teacher. Other areas, such as aims associated with 'democracy' may be better served indirectly, by procedures and attitudes expressed across the curriculum, rather than in specific syllabus content. Multicultural education is a complex area, and its aims do not readily suggest means of achieving them.

Too often, the matter of how best to address multicultural education is not given adequate consideration. Many theorists advocate strategies and activities that require teachers to plan lessons to address the values of multiculturalism directly. The result tends to be a set of recipe-like methods that do not focus on the notion of culture. Teachers can not be effective in meeting multicultural goals unless they attempt to do it on the basis of an understanding of the social nature of human beings. If teachers focus on the aims of multicultural education directly, without dealing with the complex notion of culture, they become idealogues rather than educators.

The emphasis on strategies that we find in the literature is also strong in the teacher training institutions. Since the traditional foundations of history, sociology and philosophy of education have fallen from favour, students do not have the opportunity to study those aspects of human beings