

A blue-tinted background image showing a group of people in a meeting, with one person in the foreground holding a blue marker and writing on a whiteboard.

Practitioners' experiences of implementing national education policy at the local level

An examination of 16-19 policy

Review conducted by the Post-Compulsory Education and Training Review Group

Report written by Dr Lawrence Nixon, Dr Maggie Gregson, Trish Spedding, Andrew Mearns

EPPI-Centre
Social Science Research Unit
Institute of Education
University of London

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REPORT

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Andrew Mearns (University of Sunderland)

The results of this systematic review are available in
four formats. See over page for details.

The results of this systematic review are available in four formats:

SUMMARY

Explains the purpose of the review and the main messages from the research evidence

REPORT

Describes the background and the findings of the review(s) but without full technical details of the methods used

TECHNICAL REPORT

Includes the background, main findings, and full technical details of the review

DATABASES

Access to codings describing each research study included in the review

These can be downloaded or accessed at <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/reel/>

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List of abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| AARE | Australian Association for Research in Education |
| ALLN | Adult literacy, language and numeracy |
| CETT | Centres for excellence in teacher training |
| DCSF | Department for Children, Schools and Families |
| ESOL | English for speakers of other languages |
| FE | Further education |
| GNVQ | General national vocational qualification |
| HE | Higher education |
| ICT | Information and communication technology |
| LSC | Learning and Skills Council |
| NVQ | National vocational qualification |
| OfSTED | Office for Standards in Education |
| PCET | Post-compulsory education and training |
| PGCE | Postgraduate Certificate in Education |
| TVEI | Technical and Vocational Education Initiative |
| YTS | Youth Training Scheme |
| WoE | Weight of evidence |



Abstract

What do we want to know?

What do practitioners in further education (FE) colleges say about the conditions, attitudes and implementation of National Policy?

Who wants to know and why?

This review's overall aim was to support the further development of teaching and learning. Educational policy implementation has been the focus for this review. Specifically, this review looked at post-16 practitioners' perceptions of implementing national education policy at the local level. The findings of the review are relevant to the tasks of framing, presenting and administering effective policy, policy that is able to harness the potential of local settings in the pursuit of improving teaching and learning.

What were the findings?

Key findings of the review were as follows:

- Practitioners implemented national policy, but this was generally mediated to suit local conditions. They commonly responded pragmatically to national policy, making it work for the benefit of their institution or learners.

- They felt that a key challenge when implementing policy was having to balance the requirements of working in a competitive environment (in terms of attracting students to courses) with their own judgement on the best way to teach and encourage learning. They were often unsure whether the right balance had been struck.
- They were concerned about demands for more flexibility, a feeling of 'policy initiative overload' and a local tendency to place more importance on being successful in a market environment than in teaching. Tutors in particular felt that they did not have enough space to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency. The view was expressed that this aspect of practice was the most under-exploited resource in local settings.

How were the results obtained?

A systematic search of the literature was undertaken to identify studies that related to the review question. This search aimed to identify research, which had been undertaken in post-compulsory education and training (PCET) settings, reported and analysed the views of practitioners about their role in operationalising policy in their local context. The initial collection of 512 reports was screened, using predefined inclusion/exclusion

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criteria. The screening process identified 62 reports for more detailed analysis. Initial coding of these 62 reports was used to generate a map that identified a number of themes around which the reports could be clustered. Collaborative discussion resulted in a subset of 10 studies in 14 reports for in-depth review. The detailed analysis of these 10 studies (14 reports) forms the base of the report's findings and recommendations.

Where to find further information

<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=2323>



CHAPTER ONE

Background

Aims and rationale for current review

Much has been written about education policy processes at the national level and its local effects. Much less is known about the practicalities of making education policy a reality particularly in English further education (FE) contexts. In order to address this research topic, the following question was formulated:

What do practitioners say about their experiences of implementing national post-16 education policy at the local level?

Then a specific question for in-depth review was identified as follows:

What do practitioners in FE colleges say about the conditions, attitudes and implementation of national education policy?

The review focused upon local practitioners' views of the local factors which influence the implementation of Government educational initiatives. In particular, it aimed to illuminate the human experience of implementing these initiatives in the post-16 area. The review identified studies and reports that explored, described and analysed practitioners' experiences of implementing national policy at the local level.

The review then synthesised the views of

practitioners in order to identify a range of common themes and issues. The findings of the review are presented and recommendations are made.

In this way, the review will inform the dialogues of policymakers and practitioners about current local arrangements and the impact of these on the policy implementation process. This review will also inform discussions about how the future articulation of policy and its implementation may be more effectively shaped.

Definitional and conceptual issues

The question at the heart of the review ('What do practitioners in FE colleges say about the conditions, attitudes and implementation of national education policy?') utilises a number of concepts that needed to be defined.

The term 'practitioners' used here is a collective noun to refer to of those concerned with pedagogy working in an FE institution. The distinct roles within the institution are identified using the broad categories of principal (leader of local institution), manager (senior and middle manager) and tutor (teacher working with learners).

The phrase 'say about' is used to mark the reflections of practitioners upon their own

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work in local institutions. In the context of this review, these reflections will have to make reference to implementing policy. These reflected experiences may be either directly quoted by researchers or summarised by them.

The terms 'conditions' and 'attitudes' are seen to direct attention toward particular themes in practitioner remarks. 'Conditions' signals the importance of discussions about the local working context, teaching space, management of the institution and departments, pay and conditions, and so forth. 'Attitude' signals the importance of the practitioner's evaluation of these local conditions.

The expression 'national education policy' is seen to mark a range of statements, instructions, guidelines and strategies that originated with central government. These directives were concerned with changing education practices in the post-16 sector.

Discussion of policy is further complicated by the fact that the form of policy practitioners meet in almost all local settings will be mediated. The phrase 'local policy' is used to signal the fact that national policy commonly appears in a form that has been translated to fit a local context: that is, original directives are commonly reinterpreted or recast into forms that fit the local organisation's concerns and interests.

The term 'implementation' refers to the processes whereby practice is shaped and/or influenced by the policy that is being implemented.

The reference to 'further education' is used to refer to contexts where teaching and learning takes place in further education (FE). FE is post-secondary, post-compulsory education (in addition to that received at secondary school). It may be at the same level, at a higher level, or at a lower level than secondary education, anything from basic training to Higher National and Foundation Degree. The term is mainly used in connection with education in the United Kingdom.

A distinction can be made between FE and higher education (HE) which is education at a higher level than secondary school, usually provided in distinct institutions, such as universities. FE in the United Kingdom therefore includes education for people over 16, usually excluding universities. It is primarily taught in FE colleges (which are similar in concept to United States community colleges, and sometimes use 'community college' in their title), work-based learning, and adult and community learning institutions. This includes post-16 courses similar to those taught at schools and sub-degree courses similar to those taught at HE colleges (which also teach degree-level courses) and at some universities. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/further_education).

Policy and practice background

Identifying the impact of any social policy upon practice is never a straightforward matter. There are no widely tested, universally accepted theories of public policy analysis and the same policy can be implemented in surprisingly different ways in different contexts. Furthermore, competing policy claims can be made for any gains identified in practice. This presents policymakers, researchers and practitioners with the complex task not only of making policy work in practice, but also of understanding how well and why it is, or is not, working.

Spours et al. (2007) described the implementation of education policy initiatives in the learning and skills sector in England in terms of three features: (a) policy-drivers and levers, (b) the 'bigger blacker box' (the processes of policy implementation within the organisation itself), and (c) targets and outputs (mechanisms used to measure the success of a policy). Each of these features can be associated with a level of uncertainty and/or ambiguity. Policy drivers and levers can be interpreted variously: that is, the policy intention or expressed aim, the clear ruling, can be perceived to be asking different things at different levels of the sector.

Extending Black and Wiliam's (2002) 'black box' metaphor in order to see the organisation as a 'bigger blacker box' draws attention to the huge range of institutional forms and the myriad of forces operating within them that shape individual responses to policy initiatives. Evaluating success in terms of a predetermined set of outputs leaves much unmeasured and might actually neglect the most significant impacts of an education policy initiative. Rich description does not deny the primacy of policy levers and drivers in guiding and shaping practice, but it does invite thinking carefully about the complex processes that connect policy to local contexts and local contexts to outcomes.

In order to slice through this complex process and generate a review that contributes to the task of identifying local factors and attitudes that impact on the implementation of policy, it is crucial to have a clear object of study. The Review Group decided to pick out the key element in the original tender statement, as an object of study. They decided that this was captured in the expression 'local factors'.

The Review Group decided that the practitioner was the pivotal local factor in any implementation process. Within the 'bigger black box', the post-compulsory institution of education, the practitioners operationalised policy in the context of their everyday practice and concerns.

It was decided that the phenomena of practitioner accounts of their experiences of implementing policy would provide a clear and productive object of study.

The output of the review, the rich description of local aspects of the policy implementation process, will allow policymakers and practitioners to make informed evaluations and judgements about current local arrangements for policy implementation. It will also inform discussions about how the future articulation of policy and its implementation and development may be more effectively shaped.

Research background

Much has been written about the forms and consequences of educational policy implementation at the macro level. See, for example, Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), Illeris (2003), Keep (2006) and Scott (1999). Using Bernstein's concept of the 'pedagogic device' (1996), a growing body of research has pointed towards the ways in which the relays of power embedded in education systems and educational reforms have influenced the formation of teacher identity and pedagogic practice. In the field of compulsory education, Daniels (2001), Morais and Neves (2001), Teese and Polsel (2003) have drawn attention to how top-down approaches to the implementation of education policy are influencing practice in sometimes less than optimal, often unintended, ways (Ball, 2003, 2004).

Beck and Young (2005) and Bradley and Clegg (2005) have applied Bernstein's work to reveal similar policy influences upon the formation of teacher identity and pedagogic practice in the field of higher education in England. Coffield (1999, 2002, 2004, 2005) and Coffield and Edward (2007) have extended Bernstein's ideas to reforms in post-compulsory education in the UK to highlight how a particular model for performance improvement has come to dominate the sector. Fenwick (2005), Robertson (2004) and Wheelahan (2005) have identified similar effects of the policy implementation process upon education practice in Canada and Australia.

The idea that reflections on practice are framed by the local context helped us to link statements about what is appropriate or inappropriate, effective or ineffective, and what it is possible to achieve to the local pedagogic context. In other words, the review of practitioner comments necessarily entailed reference to the institutional context in which the practitioner worked and the local form of policy implementation.

Daniels (2001) and Ball (2003, 2004) have raised concerns about the potential for

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practitioners to be faced with an over-determined working context; that is, they potentially face a range of national policy discourses that make competing demands upon them. Local mediation of national policy could either mitigate or exasperate these difficulties. The way in which these competing demands are managed in the local context will have a big impact in determining how policy is perceived and how it is understood to affect the local pedagogic context.

Overall, these discussions are relevant to the review because they foreground the importance of particular discourses in framing the conversations and attitudes. They also alert us to the fact that national policy is understood, interpreted and implemented in local settings in a range of different ways. This drive to attend to the specific runs counter to the impulse to generalise. Nevertheless, the synthesis of practitioner views from a range of local settings could be expected to identify a number of common concerns, the importance of which is attested to by their ubiquity. The synthesis of views will contribute to the discussion of how best to frame policy so that it can be successfully implemented by practitioners.

Authors, funders and other users of the review

The Review Group comprised Lawrence Nixon, Maggie Gregson, Trish Spedding and Andrew Mearns. All have an interest in either the substance of the review and/or the methodological approach of systematic reviewing. All are active researchers, teacher educators or research assistants with responsibility for education policy studies on the PGCE PCET programme at Sunderland University. The project was funded by the DCSF through the EPPI-Centre.

It is hoped that the results of this review will contribute to the development of teaching and learning by helping a range of participants (including policymakers, administrators, managers and tutors) to see more clearly how policy and its implementation can be tuned to local contexts.



CHAPTER TWO

Methods of the review

The Review Group followed the format and structure of the reviewing process set out by the EPPI-Centre framework in Appendix 1. For a more detailed outline of the methods, readers should consult the Technical Report.

User involvement

Three user groups were involved in the development of the review: academics concerned with education, experienced FE practitioners, and trainee/newly qualified teachers. Over the period of the review, the steering committee met on a number of occasions to review progress and findings to date. A number of user involvement seminars were held. These groups were asked to consider and evaluate the review findings, and to contribute to its development.

Dissemination of the results of the review to the academic community is being conducted during the academic year 2007/08. Papers drawing on the project have been submitted to the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) 2007 Conference (Fremantle, Australia) and the Philosophy of Education Conference 2008.

Identifying and describing studies

The EPPI-Centre tools and guidelines for

undertaking systematic reviews were used throughout the conduct of the review, in order to limit bias at all stages (EPPI-Centre, 2002a, 2002b and 2002c). The review question guided the search for evidence of what practitioners say about their experiences of implementing national post-16 education policy at the local level.

Reports and studies deemed relevant to the review were those that identified or summarised accounts of practitioner views on their conditions and attitudes as these related to implementing policy. The scope of the review was limited to reports and studies in English, published between 1976-2007, and based upon studies of UK education policy in the field of the post-compulsory education sector.

In-depth review

The Review Group conducted a pilot review of the mapped reports to investigate further the clustering of the articles. The aim was to begin to identify the subset of articles that could potentially address the review question most effectively. The Review Group then met to reflect on these findings and decided that further inclusion / exclusion criteria would be applied to the mapped reports. The aim of introducing these additional inclusion / exclusion criteria was that their application to the mapped reports would identify a focused

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subset of studies that most closely addressed the review question. This subset of reports would then be put forward for in-depth review. Details of the additional criteria are all listed in the full technical report.

Synthesis of evidence

The synthesis process drew on the articles selected for in-depth review. Data was extracted from these articles using the EPPI-Centre In-depth Coding Tool. The data extracted was then sorted into two kinds: (a) direct quotations from practitioners, and (b) analysis and implications drawn by the report authors.

The team then met to synthesise these sets of data to generate the findings of the review. Each direct quotation and/or author view was examined and the team sought to regroup the statements in a way that drew attention to the common concerns and themes. This process of synthesising data then generated findings of the review.

Assessments of weights of evidence

The EPPI-Centre weight of evidence (WoE) framework was used to make explicit the process of apportioning different weights to the findings and conclusions of different studies included in the in-depth review. Three criteria were used in coming to an overall weighting: the first three (criteria A-C) were designed to assess the quality of the research, and the fourth criterion (D) gives an overall grade of the study based on the grading under criteria A-C.

Criterion A (WoE A) related to the soundness of the study's methods, regardless of its appropriateness to the requirements of the systematic review.

Criterion B (WoE B) related to the appropriateness of the research design when it was being used to answer the in-depth review question.

Criterion C (WoE C) was used to assess how

relevant the focus of the study was (e.g. topic, population, setting, etc.) to answering the review question.

Criterion D (WoE D) was used to assign an overall weighting to the study in the context of the systematic review. This overall weighting was calculated from criteria A, B and C. The review team decided WoE criteria C was of the utmost importance as this criterion showed whether or not the focus of the study was directly related to the topic of the review. It was therefore decided that the overall weighting would be calculated based on a mode rating with the condition that the overall weight of evidence (D) could not be higher than the weight of evidence rating for C.

In-depth review: quality-assurance results

The studies in the in-depth review were checked for inclusion by all four members of the core Review Group. Each of the studies was then data-extracted by two members of the team and entered on to REEL, the EPPI-Centre database of educational research. Six studies were also data-extracted by EPPI-Centre staff to ensure consistency across reviews. Any differences were resolved before an agreed version was used in the final synthesis.

Nature of actual involvement of users in the review

Feedback from the Policy Steering Group and members of the Local Advisory Group were central to the development of the review question, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the focus for the in-depth review. A meeting with the Policy Steering Group was also held as the findings from the review were emerging to ensure that any further useful or relevant issues could be fed into the final report.



CHAPTER THREE

What research was found?

This chapter reports the results of the searching, screening and initial coding of the studies, all of which contributed to the production of the systematic map.

Studies included from searching and screening

From the electronic databases and full-text collections searched, references and abstracts relating to full articles relevant to the protocol question were identified with reference to the specified search strings. The resultant records came predominantly from database searches, supplemented by material identified by handsearching. Duplicated results were then removed. An initial round of screening was conducted. Using predefined inclusion exclusion criteria, 323 reports were excluded from the review and 189 reports were put forward for full-text screening.

One report was excluded as a duplicate. Full copies of the reports relating to the 188 reports were then sought. The term 'report' refers to a book or chapters in book, published article, conference papers and project reports. 168 reports were retrieved and 20 reports proved to be unobtainable within the set deadline. A second round of screening was then conducted on the 168 reports. Again, this screening process was carried out using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 106 reports were excluded. As a result of this second round of screening, 62 reports were put forward for initial coding.

Systematic map

All the studies included in the systematic map contained responses from frontline practitioners about the implementation of policy. Some studies captured the views of senior managers, some concentrated on middle managers, some reported tutors' experiences and perspectives, and others took a multi-level approach. The majority of studies explored practice in further education colleges. A smaller number of studies reflected the experience of practitioners in adult and community settings. One study compared further education colleges with sixth-form colleges. The studies that addressed adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) considered practitioner experience across sectors.

Policies referred to by practitioners tended to reflect the priorities of their institutions at particular times. These policies invariably originated outside the institution instigated by national directives and priorities, and were driven by funding mechanisms, targets and quality initiatives and regimes. Examples of the initiatives discussed by practitioners included skills for life, key skills, competence-based approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, inspection, terms and conditions of tutors' employment, performance management, levels of professional qualification, workload and individualised learning.



CHAPTER FOUR

What were the findings of the studies?

How studies were selected for the in-depth review

In order to focus the review for in-depth reviewing, consultation was undertaken with the DCSF, EPPI-Centre, user groups and the steering group. It was agreed that attention should be focused on those studies that captured the voice of practitioners, and their views of policy implementation along with their remarks about the local context of work. It was also agreed that, in a fast changing context, preference should be given to studies completed in the last 10 years.

Ten studies (represented in 14 reports) that met the additional criteria were put forward for in-depth analysis. These studies were identified from the systematic map in which there was clear presentation and analysis of practitioner's attitudes and conditions of work relating the subject of national education policy implementation at the local level.

Further details of studies included in the in-depth review

The 10 studies (represented in 14 reports) included in the in-depth review can be summarised in the following terms.

All studies were conducted in England. The practitioners were all working in FE institutions, except for two instances

where research was broadened to include practitioners from community settings and sixth-form colleges.

All the studies generated data using qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews predominated, but these were sometimes supplemented with reflective diaries, group working and observation. Although the theoretical perspectives invoked to make sense of data varied between the studies, they all shared a key feature: their investigations could be used to highlight the attitudes (perceptions, views and beliefs) of practitioners and conditions (working context), and their relationship to the implementation of national policy in the local setting.

Over half the practitioners interviewed were tutors working directly with learners. The remainder of the group were managers at various organisational levels.

The topics of funding, targets and quality assurance preoccupied many practitioners.

Summary of the results of the synthesis

Key notions in the findings statements and their links to the in-depth review articles.

'Mediation' and 'local policy'

The idea that national policy is mediated in local settings drew on Shain and Gleeson (1999), and the impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield et al., 2007; Spours et al., 2007). Shain and Gleeson's invitation to view many practitioners as 'strategic compliers' captures the way in which policy is manipulated by practitioners at various institutional levels. Spours amplifies this sense of national policy undergoing transformation as it moves from one arena to another with his use of the idea of policy 'translation'. The term 'translation' perhaps conjures the image of an uncertain journey, in which original meanings can be lost and unexpected meanings appear and supplant the original. Here the intention behind the original policy statements and its call for action seems threatened by a necessary but unpredictable iterative process.

The term 'local policy' marks the concrete and commonly unambiguous directives that determine large aspects of day to day local practice.

The reality of policy mediation is captured in the following practitioner statement: '... we are told basically, 'This is what you are going to do: this is what we suggest you do and your funding depends on it', then is that not what we do?' (Coffield and Edward, 2007, p 13). Here we can imagine how an original policy intention, such as the intention to improving adult literacy levels in England, has through various levels of translation become, an almost irresistible force directing day-to-day practice in a way that appears to leave little room for individual or collaborative initiative.

'Marketised form', 'context dominated by marketised discourses', 'local policy articulation', 'valorisation of market principles' and 'demand for more and more flexibility'

The vast majority of studies considered in this

review identified a particular management form to dominate local settings: Bathmaker (2005), Briggs (2005), the impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield et al., 2007; Edward et al., 2007), Gleeson (2001), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (Gleeson et al., 2005), Hamilton and Hillier (2006), James and Gleeson (2007), Ozga and Deem (2000), Robson et al. (2004), Shain and Gleeson (1999). This management model was commonly described as neo-liberal or marketised. These marketising discourses picture the institution, its workers and its output in a particular 'technological' way. They also see the relationships that pertain between the parties in this setting in particular instrumental ways. Staff, for example, are encouraged to be flexible in what, who and how they teach (Gleeson, 2001; Gleeson et al., 2005).

One practitioner statement strikingly captures the way of seeing associated with these marketised discourses: '(Sally, senior manager) Eastward College is a corporation; we are the employer and we are totally responsible for our employees in terms of employment legislation...The employer in the past was **** County Council - a body far removed... The college has got a strong identity, although having said that, some people have taken quite a while to adjust to it - some people perhaps won't ever adjust - and it has brought with it...a sort of commercialisation, a sense of reality that we have to win' (Gleeson, 2001, p 183). This manager, gripped by this neo-liberal picture, sees the academy in business terms and, we suspect, she will hear policy to be speaking of outcomes to be measured in terms of productivity.

'A pragmatic response' and 'the benefit of the institution/learners'

A number of articles, Bathmaker (2005), Bolton and Hyland (2003), Coffield et al. (2007), Gleeson (2001), Robson et al. (2004) explored the way in which practitioners responded to policy through a reciprocal process of interaction. On the one hand, they

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adapted themselves and their institutions to policy innovations; on the other, they adapted policy to their local settings. In a forceful piece of work, Bolton and Hyland (2003) demonstrate how a policy articulated through a problematic 'skills' discourse has been made to carry real and positive meanings for learners through the work of tutors. Tellingly, Bolton and Hyland also illustrate just how many different 'translations' can be rung from the same policy statement. Another example of pragmatic response is found in Bathmaker (2005), who considers the response of tutors to the policy of extending inclusivity as actualised through the policy of general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs). Bathmaker charts the pragmatic way practitioners strive to make the policy a success.

The ways in which tutors strive to implement policy pragmatically is illuminated in the following: 'We give students an aim to go as high as they can, and we try to give them an incentive to stay in training because it's a difficult industry to stay in...it is about the actual pride in the work, which is a great motivator and that does not appear on the NVQ' (Robson et al., 2004, p 189). The pragmatic response to policy is found in the expressed determination to work with the NVQ framework and supplement it in ways that enhance the learning experience.

The Review Group also found evidence in the in-depth review articles that practitioners, situated at different levels within the organisation, had different understandings of what making policy work for the benefit of the institution and/or the learner, could and should be like. This theme is taken up again under the next heading.

'Balancing marketised and pedagogic duties' and 'the balance between pedagogic and marketised priorities'

A number of articles considered the role of practitioners as they strived to negotiate the currents of marketising and pedagogic discourse: the impact of policy on learning

and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield et al., 2007; Gleeson, 2001), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (James and Gleeson, 2007), and Ozga and Deem (2000). The work of Coffield et al. (2007) offers a clear and detailed discussion of how practitioners struggle to meet competing demands. The analysis of practitioner views offered by Coffield et al. (2007) show how tutors struggle to meet the institutional priorities often expressed in marketised terms, while still addressing the pedagogical needs of their learners.

This state of affairs is summed up in the following pithy statement: '[Paul, drop-in centre tutor] It feels to me like the audit process assumes a certain mode of learning: the students turn up and sit in the classrooms, which we simply don't do' (Gleeson et al., 2005, p 454). The tutor here expresses exasperation at an image of student learning that the marketised discourse assumes. One might assume that the tutor is drawing a contrast between this imagined simplicity and the far more involved reality of the drop-in centre and the pedagogic strategies that are actually appropriate to this context.

'Space to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency', 'practitioners ability to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency', 'the under-exploited resource', 'professional and pedagogic insecurity' and 'devaluing of pedagogic principles'

The majority of in-depth review articles raised concerns about the ability of practitioners to exercise pedagogic agency: Bathmaker (2005), Briggs (2005), the impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield et al., 2007), Edward et al. (2007), Gleeson (2001), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (Gleeson et al., 2005); James and Gleeson (2007), Hamilton and Hillier (2006), Ozga and Deem (2000), Robson et al. (2004), and Shain and Gleeson (1999). Hamilton and Hillier's (2006)

Table 4.1 Synthesis of data/relationship of synthesis to findings

| Findings | Reports |
|---|---|
| National policy is mediated in virtually all local settings. | Briggs (2003), The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield and Edward, 2007), Gleeson (2001) The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield and Edward, 2007; Coffield et al. 2007; Spours et al., 2007), Shain and Gleeson (1999) |
| Practitioners commonly respond pragmatically to local policy, making it work for the benefit of their institution/learners. | Bathmaker (2005), The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Edward et al. 2007), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (Gleeson et al., 2005), Hamilton and Hillier (2006), Robson et al. (2004), Shain and Gleeson (1999) Bathmaker (2005), Bolton and Hyland (2003); The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield and Edward, 2007), Gleeson (2001), Robson et al. (2004) |
| Practitioners are faced with balancing the duties placed on them by both marketising and pedagogic discourses. | The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Edward et al. 2007; Spours et al. 2007), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (Gleeson et al., 2005), Ozga and Deem (2000), Shain and Gleeson (1999) The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield et al., 2007), Gleeson (2001), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (James and Gleeson, 2007), Ozga and Deem (2000) |
| Concerns are expressed about the ability to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency. | The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Edward et al., 2007), Gleeson (2001), Shain and Gleeson (1999) Bathmaker (2005), Briggs (2005), The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Coffield and Edward, 2007; Edward et al. 2007), Gleeson (2001), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (Gleeson et al., 2005; James and Gleeson, 2007), Hamilton and Hillier (2006), Ozga and Deem (2000), Robson et al. (2004), Shain and Gleeson (1999) |
| Concerns are expressed about professional and pedagogic insecurity. | The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector (Edward et al., 2007) The impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector (Coffield et al., 2007; Edward et al., 2007), Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (Gleeson et al., 2005), Hamilton and Hillier (2006) |

graphic description of how pedagogic agency has been encouraged or stifled by particular organisations of the working arena, along with their analysis of the potential benefits and drawbacks of these forms, offers a striking example of how tutors' initiatives can be enabled or constrained by the context within which they must act.

The limited sense of agency found in many

contemporary local settings is summed up by the tutor who states: 'We don't know what's happening as tutors—we're nearly always the last to know. And it's not been the programme managers' fault; they don't know either' (Edward et al., 2007, p 161).

In summary, the above remarks seek to capture the way in which the Review Group's discussions of the themes and issues

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inherent in the in-depth review articles led them to pick out these particular terms and expressions. The link between the finding statements and in-depth reports is also captured in Table 4.1.

The key components identified from the studies included in the in-depth review are as follows:

- National policy is mediated in virtually all local settings.
- Practitioners commonly respond pragmatically to local policy, making it work for the benefit of their institution/learners.
- Practitioners balance the duties placed on them by both marketising and pedagogic discourses.
- Practitioners, particularly tutors, identified concerns about their ability to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency to constrict the exercise of pedagogic judgement and agency.
- Tutors sometimes expressed attitudes of professional and pedagogic insecurity.



CHAPTER FIVE

Implications, or 'What does this mean?'

This section of the review places the findings in context. Some strengths and limitations of the review are identified, then implications are drawn out for different users.

Strengths and limitations of this systematic review

A clear strength of the review is its use of systematic reviewing techniques based on EPPI-Centre procedures and techniques which aim to make the processes of systematic reviewing more transparent and objective.

A further strength of the review is its relevance to current policy and practice, and the involvement of potential users of the review. In particular, a key aim of the review was to identify the conditions, views and attitudes about implementing national policy at the local level.

The findings of the review are supported by earlier work in the area.

The limitations of the review derive primarily from the breadth and complexity of the concepts that frame the descriptions of local conditions. A number of features of fundamental importance to the review, and the definition of its object of study, lacked conceptual clarity.

First, the term 'policy' is recognised in the

literature to be a 'loose term used to cover value commitments, strategic objectives operational instruments' (Finlay et al., 2007, p 138). The implication of this broad definition is that it allows a wide range of activities to be legitimately labelled with the term and therefore the specifics of the study could vary widely. Any differences in focus would be crucial to correctly interpreting and evaluating practitioner attitudes and views on conditions.

These difficulties were further compounded by the ambiguities that resulted from situating the term 'policy' in relation to the terms 'local' and 'national'. While the terms 'local' and 'national' can be used to mark a distinction between central government settings and local settings, the fact that national policy is almost always mediated complicates the idea that national policy is implemented in a local setting (Coffield et al., 2007; Spours et al. 2007). This observation is directly reflected in the fact that the policy practitioners implement and talk about is almost always a localised version of the original national policy statement or initiative.

This observation has two consequences for the review: first, it challenges any inclination to draw a simple causal link between national policy statements and practitioners' views and attitudes. This is because the practitioner response will commonly be to the local or mediated version of the policy. Second, it would be unwise to generalise from any

one context, unless similar responses were detected across settings. These concerns must be balanced against the fact that the research found similar comments from practitioners in different contexts.

It must also be noted that some of the studies used terms such as 'managerialism', 'marketisation', 'neo-liberal management' and 'quasi-market ideas' to describe the administrative context. The wide range of meanings that can be associated with the terms means no simple equivalence can be drawn between the uses. Some studies, however, mitigated this danger by focusing on topics, such as targets and funding, which could be understood across the contexts.

Finally, the expression 'pedagogic judgement and agency' has been used in the review to mark a collection of comments from practitioners about their role as teachers engaged with learners. The justification in collecting comments and analysis under this heading is the similarity in the claims made: that is, comments about working with and for learners. This term deserves further careful consideration.

Further, the field of post-compulsory education and training as a whole is under-researched. This fact limited the number of studies available to the review. That is, while acknowledging the quality and depth of the large studies included in the review, it must also be noted that at present there are only a limited number of these studies available.

It is also important to reflect on the position of the members of the Review Group in relation to the topic. One was a researcher on The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector project, from which four papers in this review are drawn. The sphere of post-16 FE research in the UK is fairly small and all the authors of the papers are well known and known personally by members of the Review Group. The Review Group and most of the authors of the papers in the in-depth review could probably be described as coming from a

critical sociological tradition within education research and this perspective informs the interpretations in the review.

Implications

Introduction

This section details the Review Group's interpretation of the findings of the review. In the specific arena of education, the following claim is made:

The most effective way to further enhance national policy implementation will be to develop arenas where informed, practice focused interpretations of policy can be made and applied in local contexts. In these settings, the collaborative dialogue between policy-makers and practitioners could promote responsibility and agency, translate policy more effectively into frontline practice, and develop pedagogy and generate feedback for future policy development.

In order to substantiate and add detail to these claims, this section foregrounds the most significant aspects of the review findings. It then identifies the challenges that lie behind these features. Finally, it presents one practical strategy that could be used to address these challenges effectively.

The section identifies the implications of the review for understanding the current organisation of policy implementation and local practice. It also suggests lessons which can be taken from the review to guide the future development of policy and its implementation, practice and research.

Key features and challenges

In this section, the three most significant features of the review findings (mediation, competing demands, and constrained professional and pedagogic agency) are identified and the challenges associated with them explored. The first significant aspect of the review findings is located at the heart

of the statement that national policy is mediated in virtually all local settings. The term 'mediation' alludes to the complexity of the policy implementation process and signals an inherent unpredictability or uncertainty associated with this process. The double-edged nature of the term 'mediation' draws attention to this inherent uncertainty. The term alludes both to the mediators who facilitate progress, and find the common ground, and also to the mediators who thwart development, subvert discussion and forward only their own interests. The ideas that policy is mediated and that this mediation may be more or less 'successful' is the first issue the review foregrounds.

The challenge that the 'uncertainty' associated with mediation puts before policymakers and administrators is how best to manage the implementation process so that the original intended outcomes are achieved. The research studies considered in the in-depth review point to the fact that, at present in England, there has been an almost unanimous preference to manage this uncertainty with the levers of targets, funding and quality assurance. The direct and forceful way in which these mechanisms can function to shape and control the implementation process explains their appeal to administrators and managers.

The second significant aspect of the review findings that deserves careful consideration is located in the statement that claims that practitioners balance the duties placed on them by both marketising and pedagogic discourses. While this finding was seen, in part, to point to the willingness of all practitioners to work hard to implement policy in their local setting, it also focused attention on the frontline tutor's concerns about their ability to satisfy competing demands (Ball, 2003). Bathmaker (2005), for example, discusses the way in which tutors are forced to balance the competing demands for practice to be as inclusive as possible and for maximum cohort achievement.

The second aspect of the review that deserves

further consideration is the insecurity and possible inertia resulting from tutors being situated in an over-populated discursive field. The risk is that the priorities set by marketised discourses come to dominate and displace pedagogical concerns. The challenge here is to bypass these ambiguous ways of being located and establish the conditions that inspire relevant, creative and effective practitioner responses to unique local conditions.

The third significant aspect of the review findings suggests that practitioners, particularly tutors, identified concerns about their ability to exercise pedagogic judgement and agency; tutors sometimes expressed attitudes of professional and pedagogic insecurity.

The final aspect of the finding statement that deserves careful consideration is the tutor perception that their agency is currently constrained and even discouraged. This claim can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, the suggestion that individual and collective practitioner agency is constrained could be taken at face value and be seen to reinforce the above discussion of evaluation and development. The challenge this aspect of the review sets is that of how to enhance further the practitioner's ability to act in the public good to make policy work in the local context. The second, less flattering, way to interpret this claim is to hear it as a statement of 'adversarialism' (Sarason, 1990, p 23). Sarason observes that in educational contexts where ownership is not taken and responsibility not claimed, the common corollary is blaming of others for failure and/or lack of progress. If the statement about a lack of pedagogic agency is taken as evidence of adversarialism, then one would need to look for its cause. Whichever interpretation is preferred, the implication would seem to be the same: to establish a space in which practitioners are empowered and willing to take responsibility for teaching and learning, implementing policy and its improvement.

When combined, these aspects of the review findings (mediation dominated by

marketised discourses, practitioners caught between competing demands and a sense of a constrained professional and pedagogic agency) draw attention to an interesting possibility: the apparent assurance with which current policy-levers are able to manage the uncertainty associated with policy mediation can draw attention away from the detrimental effects these levers have on frontline practice. Paradoxically, the tools currently utilised to implement policy may operate, on the ground, in ways that undermine the achievement of the desired outcomes, in so far as they operate in local settings to restrict pedagogic agency.

Practical strategies

This section considers how the conditions might be established in which tutors are supported to take and share responsibility for local situations, and are active in evaluating and developing their own performance. In such situations, practitioners would be more able to play an active role in engaging with the task of implementing policy and making it work in their local settings. This alternative approach would also need to assure quality and offer some mechanism for controlling the instability inherent in the policy mediation process.

In order to free up professional practitioner agency, in the context of making policy work in local settings, two mechanisms could be adopted. The first mechanism would establish high quality professional development provision within the sector alongside robust incentives designed to facilitate and promote participation. For this provision to produce the desired outcomes, it will need to bring together current policy priorities, current pedagogic research and practitioner experience and understanding of local conditions. It will need to explore these interconnected issues and themes in ways that keep the focus on the individual/team practice.

One concrete way to establish such a regime is suggested by the government's current initiative to establish centres of excellence

in teacher training (CETTs). In nearly all instances in this model, universities act as hubs for practitioner development. These centres are distinguished by their three aims: to address policy priorities, to make available to practitioners the resources of the academy, research findings and informed dialogue, and to focus on local practice.

Gregson and Spedding of the Sunderland Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training have devised and are currently managing the implementation of a project that is framed by these principles. This project creates spaces where practitioners, in consultation and collaboration with research and academics, can develop evaluation skills, initiative and professional confidence. At the heart of this process is the collaborative development aims and, the collaborative evaluation of performance and the collaborative setting of further aims. Through shared teaching, shared reviewing, shared innovation development and shared target-setting and management, practitioners work as part of a team to implement policy. In this collaborative arrangement, the impetus for initiative comes from the collaborative response to local conditions. Responsibility for the progress made is shared and the emphasis falls on what is practically possible in a specific local setting.

The second mechanism required will need to manage the uncertainty associated with policy mediation in productive ways. This mechanism will need to ground evaluation and development in practice, encourage genuine ownership and make space for creative tensions and argument, and also make space for the determined promotion of the agreed solution (Lindblom, 2000). By threading policy aims into an ongoing collaborative relationship, opportunities will be opened up to mutually agreed targets, progress will be recorded, performance evaluated and targets then readjusted. The collaborative nature of this process will foster responsibility and initiative. It will also establish a feedback loop capable of supporting timely, adjustments to practice. The foundations for the building

of such a relationship could already exist in the relationships that have been established between practitioners, CETTs and policy administrators. These collaborative forms could be developed to generate the required administrative mechanisms.

Research opportunities

Given the above discussion, the Review Group identified three areas in which further research could profitably be focused. First, further research could be conducted, on both a theoretical and practical level, into the mediation process. Investigations would focus on how the implications of national policy for particular local settings can, and should, be collaboratively forged, monitored and adjusted.

Second, research could be conducted into the performance of the current CETT initiative to investigate if its model of operation actually works to re-establish a link between evaluation, practice development and local settings. In other words, investigate

whether pedagogic agency and professional responsibility can be enhanced by participation in a project that collaboratively reconnects evaluation and development; such an investigation should also be able to identify facilitating and inhibiting factors.

Finally, research could be conducted into the potential and possible weaknesses associated with establishing the form of policy implementation process embodied in the CETT initiative. In this case, the research would investigate the possibility of establishing responsive target setting mechanisms that were able to foster evaluation and development between those involved.

The aim of conducting this research would be to ascertain the potential of reconnecting evaluation and development with the individual/team in the policy implementation process. The frontline conditions currently exist, through the CETTs initiative, to test the hypothesis the Review Group has described.



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Appendix 1: The standard EPPI-Centre systematic review process

What is a systematic review?

A systematic review is a piece of research following standard methods and stages. A review seeks to bring together and 'pool' the findings of primary research to answer a particular review question, taking steps to reduce hidden bias and 'error' at all stages of the review. The review process is designed to ensure that the product is accountable, replicable, updateable and sustainable. The systematic review approach can be used to answer any kind of review question. Clarity is needed about the question, why it is being asked and by whom, and how it will be answered. The review is carried out by a Review Team / Review Group. EPPI-Centre staff provide training, support and quality assurance to the review Team / Review Group.

Stages and procedures in a standard EPPI-Centre review

- Formulate review question and develop protocol.
- Define studies to be included with inclusion criteria.
- Search for studies: a systematic search strategy, including multiple sources, is used.
- Screen studies for inclusion:
- Inclusion criteria should be specified in the

review protocol.

- All identified studies should be screened against the inclusion criteria.
- The results of screening (number of studies excluded under each criterion) should be reported.
- Describe studies (keywording and/or in depth data extraction):
- Bibliographic and review management data on individual studies
- Descriptive information on each study
- The results or findings of each study
- Information necessary to assess the quality of the individual studies

At this stage, the review question may be further focused and additional inclusion criteria applied to select studies for an 'in-depth' review.

- Assess study quality (and relevance):
- A judgement is made by the Review Team/ Review Group about the quality and relevance of studies included in the review.
- The criteria used to make such judgements should be transparent and systematically

applied.

- Synthesise findings:
- The results of individual studies are brought together to answer the review question(s).
- A variety of approaches can be used to synthesise the results. The approach used should be appropriate to the review question and studies in the review.
- The Review Team / Review Group interpret the findings and draw conclusions and implications from them.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance (QA) can check the execution of the methods of the review, just as in primary research, for example, through the following:

- Internal QA: individual reviewer competence, moderation, double-coding
- External QA: audit/editorial process, moderation, double-coding
- Peer referee of: protocol, draft report, published report feedback
- Editorial function for report: by review specialist, peer review, non-peer review

The results of this systematic review are available in four formats:

SUMMARY

Explains the purpose of the review and the main messages from the research evidence

REPORT

Describes the background and the findings of the review(s) but without full technical details of the methods used

**TECHNICAL
REPORT**

Includes the background, main findings, and full technical details of the review

DATABASES

Access to codings describing each research study included in the review

These can be downloaded or accessed at <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/reel/>

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