



Curran, H. (2019) 'Are good intentions enough? The role of the policy implementer during educational reform', *PRACTICE*, 1 (1), pp. 88-93.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *PRACTICE* on 02/04/19 available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2019.1591764>

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Are good intentions enough? The role of the policy implementer during educational reform

Abstract

Nationally the educational landscape is changing and it could be argued that reform is taking place at an unprecedented rate. Associated with educational reform is the introduction of new policy, including statutory guidance. This article seeks to consider policy implementation in schools, specifically through the lens of the policy actor typology (Ball et al., 2012). The article focuses on the introduction of the SEND reforms and deliberates the policy actor roles the SENCO, as a key implementer, could be seen to assume. Additionally, the article queries the potential barriers which may prevent the implementation of policy as originally conceived as well as the potential outcome of unintended consequences, ultimately asking the question, 'Are good intentions enough?'

Nationally the educational landscape is changing, and it could be argued that changes are taking place at an unprecedented rate across all elements and phases of education. Changes are broad and include the introduction of a new curriculum (DfE, 2014), different assessment processes as well as structural changes, for example the growth of Multi-Academy Trusts and Free Schools, amongst many other revisions and introductions. Such changes have been set against a backdrop of 'radical political and economic changes and of far-reaching trends, to which schools, colleges and universities have to respond' (Roberts and Pring, 2016: 17).

The introduction of new policy typically corresponds with the rapid development of statutory and non-statutory guidance for schools; 'a specification of principles and actions, related to educational issues, which are followed, or which should be followed, and which are designed to bring about desired goals' (Trowler, 2003: 95). Consequently, this places teachers in the position of implementing concurrent, and often conflicting, policies. Teachers are having to attribute value and importance to policies, whilst navigating the often difficult waters of aligning to policies they find 'controversial and challenging' (Brundrett, 2011: 339). Yet equally it could be argued that teachers are in a position of trying to implement policies which they feel are under-resourced, lack appropriate support and understanding and, as a consequence, feel unobtainable.

Ball and colleagues (2012) describe how teachers can be viewed as policy narrators, selecting and determining policy priorities, yet they also argue that separate or concurrent roles can be adopted,

including the role of the policy enthusiast and the policy critic amongst others; this potentially may account for the conflicting feelings teachers may feel towards policy implementation. However, it could also be argued that whilst it is possible for teachers to assume various policy actor and implementer positions, the current landscape, particularly in relation to the volume and rapid production of educational policy, has made it challenging for teachers to have time or space to reflect on their own position. Therefore, teachers can then be left in the position of being policy consumers, or receivers (Ball et al., 2012) which, it could be argued, places teachers in a position of powerlessness which may be exacerbated by their personal position in relation to the principles of the policy.

However, conversely it could equally be argued that new policy is the vehicle which provides space for teachers to critically reflect on their individual and collective positions with regards to new initiatives and as such this can provide teachers with the agency and the efficacy to effect change in their settings; acting as policy enthusiasts and entrepreneurs (Ball et al., 2012). This suggests that the introduction of new policy can be viewed as an opportunity and can be used in such a way to promote individual or collective agendas which may, or may not, be directly related to the central policy (Ball et al., 2012). This therefore poses the questions, what roles do policy actors typically assume during a period of policy implementation and why? Equally, to what extent can the nature of the policy actor role influence the implementation of policy?

A most recent example of educational policy, which illustrates varying policy actor roles, is the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reforms which came in to force on 1st September 2014, following the Children and Families Act 2014. It could be argued that the development of any policy is as a direct response to an identified problem (Trowler, 2003; Ball et al., 2012), and the introduction of the SEND reforms certainly sought to do that. In 2006 the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee on Special Educational Needs (SEN) reported formal concerns regarding the then system for supporting SEN in schools, specifically with regards to inclusion. Whilst several policies were introduced as a response, including a new national accreditation for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo), issues remained. A further review in 2008, the Lamb Inquiry, found there to be issues regarding the piecemeal nature of educational policies, stating that '... there needs to be a major reform of the current system' (DCFS, 2009:1). Such findings were later echoed by the Ofsted report: A statement is not enough (2010) which identified further issues with the SEN system, including problems with identification and teaching. With the assent of the Coalition government, a review of the SEN system concluded similar findings (DfE,

2012), and consequently new policy reforms were enacted; specifically, the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the related statutory guidance, The SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2014; 2015) (Hereafter referred to as The SEND Code).

The SEND reforms have been documented as the most significant reforms for thirty years (DfE, 2014a). The SEND Code stated that that vision for children with SEND 'is the same as for all children and young people, that they achieved well in their early years, at school and in college, and lead happy and fulfilled lives (DfE and DoH, 2015: 11). The SEND Code has been written around three core principles which relate to: developing the voice with children, young people and their families, the increased effective participation of children, young people and their families, the provision of effective support to achieve the best educational outcomes. The SEND Code further states that expectations should be high for every pupil, needs should be identified and supported early on, and the system should be outcome focused for the pupil.

In addition to the wide-ranging changes the SEND reforms sought to bring, the reforms are of interest as an example of policy implementation because the lead policy actor in the school context was primarily attributed to a nationally confused and contested role, which often lacks seniority: the SENCo (Rosen-Webb, 2011). It could have been predicted, due to previous research regarding the complexity of the SENCo role (Szwed, 2007; Pearson, 2010; Qureshi, 2014), that the SENCos in this lead policy implementation role would be likely to experience challenges when endeavouring to implement school wide, systemic change. Perhaps the first challenge experienced by SENCos related to the release of the final version of the SEND Code in the first week of the summer holidays in 2014, with an intended 'roll out' six weeks later on the 1st September 2014, the same day when the New Curriculum was due to come into force, including the removal of levels. This immediately placed obstacles in the way for SENCos in terms of time but also competing priorities within schools. It certainly is curious, given the stated prominence and intentions of the SEND reforms, to consider the decision making surrounding the timing of the release, both in terms of preparation time, but also competing priorities. Norwich states, the SEN system is 'interdependent' on the wider education system (2014: 404), although interdependence should not be confused with equal priority. It is not hard to imagine the challenge faced by SENCos trying to advocate for SEND reform training during a major curriculum and assessment review. Perhaps this illustrates not only the issues of competing policy priorities, at a national and local level, but also the tensions identified between the inclusion and standards agenda (Ellis and Tod, 2014).

Yet, despite the reported challenges related to timing, priority and role confusion, the introduction of this new policy illustrated SENCOs acting as policy entrepreneurs (Ball et al. 2012; Curran, 2017); SENCOs were recognising the potential opportunity to use new policy as a vehicle to create change in their settings despite the barriers (Curran, 2017). It is interesting to consider whether tensions related with the role, including a lack of seniority and understanding, influenced the SENCOs seizing of this opportunity, potentially acting as a motivator? The changes SENCOs implemented related to promoting a more person centred, family centred approach to providing support for children with SEN (Curran, 2017). SENCOs were reportedly seeking to advocate for parents, pushing towards a more informed, collaborative approach, whilst also recognising their role as an advocate for children and teachers. Morewood draws attention to the SENCOs' feelings of 'ethical responsibility' (2012:75), perhaps indicating that in this particular instance there may be more congruence and alignment from SENCOs in relation to the SEND reform principles due to its underlying inclusive, moral purpose; this may, in part, explain the drive of the SENCOs to create change in their settings in relation to pupil and parent voice. This poses the question, do some roles within school carry a greater weight of moral and ethical purpose, and how does this influence the post-holder in terms of how the approach policy implementation in the wider sense?

Certainly, it could be argued that many SENCOs approached the SEND reforms with good intentions; keen to understand and implement new policy, enthusing and advocating for the principles of the SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015) in their settings. Yet, are good intentions enough and at what point do factors outside of the policy implementers control begin to impact on the efficacy of their role as a policy implementer?

Perhaps one example which demonstrates the impact of external factors, despite the best of intentions, is the focus within the SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015) to provide outcome focused provision. Outcomes should be long term, cross phase and 'the support and intervention provided should be selected to meet the outcomes identified for the pupil' (DfE and DoH, 2015: 101). However, despite the intention, the SENCO and school are always going to be limited by the resources available to the school, reflecting the view of Robert and Pring (2016) regarding the impact of economic changes; recent research from The Key (Sellgren, 2016) suggests that of the 1100 school leaders surveyed, 82% reported that they have insufficient funding to support children with SEN, with nearly 90% reporting that the cuts to support from the LAs have detrimentally affected children. This creates a dilemma for the SENCO, how can they fulfil the principles of the SEND Code if the resources have not been made available to do so? Equally this

presents a moral conundrum for an ethical role with limited resources, who should the resources be allocated to?

Issues with limited resources, and the impact of this on individuals with SEN, indicates that despite good intentions, enacting the principles of the SEND reforms is a challenge for those tasked with implementation. However, there are perhaps more covert ways in which individuals have been potentially negatively impacted by good intentions when enacting policy. The introduction of the SEND reforms presented an opportunity for SENCOs to undertake a broader review of their school SEN systems, with SENCOs reporting they were reviewing their school wide systems for identifying SEN. SENCOs were considering the term 'SEN' and the application of the legal definition in their contexts. Pearson and colleagues noted prior to the introduction of the SEND reforms that 'the dominant view, however, is that there will be a steady reduction in the number of children in the SEN register (2015: 52). Certainly, this echoed earlier findings from Ofsted (2010) which stated that children with SEN were being over identified. Yet whilst the legal definition of SEN had not changed with the introduction of the SEND Code, SENCOs post reform were reviewing their registers and the notable impact was that the number of children identified as having SEN reduced post September 2014 (DfE, 2015; Curran, 2017; Curran et al., 2017). In 2014 the figures of children reported as having SEN were 17.9%, this fell to 15.4% in 2015 (DfE, 2015). The figures and reasons behind the reductions can be debated; SENCOs were revisiting and reconsidering the legal definition of SEN, the newly introduced category of SEN Support had brought about confusion regarding classification of need, equally the threshold for determining need had been raised, in part due to resources (Curran, 2017). It could be argued that such actions directly contradict the earlier described actions of the policy enthusiast, entrepreneur and advocate. Therefore, the question remains, how have these changes been managed by SENCOs in schools, in line with the family centred principles of the new SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015), and who is now monitoring and supporting the children who were previously identified as SEN prior to September 2014, as well as the teachers who are teaching them?

Certainly, the SEND reforms have provided an opportunity to reflect on the position of a specific policy implementer in an instance when the nature of the policy has been described as the most significant reforms for thirty years (DfE, 2014a). In this instance the interest specifically lies within the nature of the primary policy implementer; the SENCO is a mandatory, yet widely confused role and is often reported as lacking the status to effect change (Szwed, 2007; Pearson, 2010; Qureshi, 2014). Yet, when an opportunity for radical reforms presented itself, SENCOs appeared to embrace

the opportunity to effect change in their settings, using policy as a vehicle to create change, potentially in response to the 'ethical responsibility' they felt (Morewood, 2012:75).

To conclude, it could be argued that the introduction of new policy can afford opportunities to those who are key to its implementation. The SEND reforms have illustrated that despite the known challenges associated with the role, the SENCO can use policy to influence, to motivate and to further specific agendas. However, perhaps the SEND reforms have also highlighted the potential barriers faced by those who seek to create change, and the ways in which they have sought to mitigate such challenges; through various actions including those of the *covert entrepreneur*. Yet, despite the motivation and good intentions of the policy implementer, the SEND reforms equally illustrate an example where the policy implementer role can have its limitations and the outcomes of policy implementation can ultimately conflict with the underlying principles of the intended policy, despite the best of intentions by those seeking to implement it.