

# European Policy Network on School Leadership

## **School Leadership and Equity: an examination of policy response in Scotland**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we adopt a critical perspective on the implementation of policy on school leadership and equity in Scotland, viewing policy as both an attempt to solve problems and an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action. We begin by offering a definition of “policy response”, and then examine how policy “conversations” establish consensus around such things as school leadership and equity. We examine Scottish policy on school leadership and equity and consider what practices this policy does, and does not permit. In so doing, our examination of the implementation of policy on school leadership and equity in Scotland acknowledges that such policy is in part extemporized, and in part the attempt to make inevitable a “de-stated” account of governance. We conclude by contextualising our forthcoming empirical study of the Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland.

### **Introduction**

In this paper we adopt a critical perspective on the implementation of policy on school leadership and equity in Scotland, viewing policy as both an attempt to solve problems and an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action. We share Ball *et al*'s (2012, p. 8) conviction that ‘few policies arrive fully formed’ and that the processes of policy enactment ‘involve ad-hockery, borrowing, re-ordering, displacing, making do and re-invention’. However, we also endorse Ball’s (1993, p. 12) view that policies ‘create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed’. In this paper we provide an examination of the implementation of policy on school leadership and equity in Scotland that acknowledges that such policy is in part extemporized, and in part the attempt to make inevitable a “de-stated” account of governance. We begin by asking, ‘What is “policy response” and how do policy “conversations” begin’? Next, we consider school leadership and equity policy response in Scotland, and ask what practices such policy does, and does not permit. Finally, we identify Scotland’s policy implementers, and contextualise our

forthcoming empirical enquiry into the Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland.

### **What is “policy response”?**

The phrase “policy response” brings to mind a dialogue between policy makers, who devise educational targets and programmes, and policy implementers, who respond by putting these plans into action. In recent years, the nature of this dialogue has been examined by researchers interested in socio-cultural dynamics, and in her review of conceptions of policy, Nudzor (2009) identifies three dominant paradigms: (i) the ‘problem-solving’ model positions policy as a ‘document of some sort’ that is created by policy makers and put into practice by implementers (ibid, p. 93); (ii) the ‘process model’ positions policy as ‘a site of struggle, negotiation and dialogue’, with the outcome (e.g. leadership strategies) co-created by makers and implementers (ibid, p. 91); (iii) the ‘theoretical eclecticism’ model positions policy as the ‘exercise of power and language that is used to legitimate the process’ and draws upon the problem-solving model *and* the process model (ibid, p. 93).

The theoretical eclecticism view of policy, which is favoured by Nudzor, features prominently in literature on power relations in neoliberal democracies. For example, Harvey (2009) describes how governments seek to persuade the populace to accept policy by embedding novel ideas within the existing discourse. He states:

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question.  
(Harvey, 2009: 5)

If Harvey is correct, then policy on school leadership and equity is accepted by implementers only if it appeals to their existing instincts and desires. Of course, we know that “unappealing” policy is often rejected in democratic societies (consider, for example, the public’s response to the UK poll tax in 1990, which led to riots and the eventual abandonment of this policy). It appears, therefore, that implementers (and indeed the “acted upon”) hold power in their relationship with policy makers, and it is perhaps for this reason that policy makers court favour with implementers. Using the example of an English policy document on teaching and school reform, Lumby and Muijs (2013, p. 14) demonstrate that such favour is sought through ‘linguistic

strategies' that position 'both authors and audiences as adherents to admirable values; in favour of equality and champions of the disadvantaged'. For Lumby and Muijs (ibid) these 'admirable values' mask the 'deceit that real change in education is the aim of the majority', and that the real purpose of policy is to sustain an education system that enables the advantaged to extract benefit from state systems 'at a considerable and unjustifiable cost to others' (ibid). No doubt policy implementers would feel uncomfortable with policies on teaching and school reform that cast policy makers, teachers and head teachers as enthusiastic co-creators of social injustice, and it is therefore not surprising that Lumby and Muijs (ibid, p. 13) discovered instead a policy narrative of 'outraged authors joined by worthy but downtrodden teachers and head teachers'. Ball (1993, p. 11) points out that 'Policies enter existing patterns of inequality', and discourses on social phenomena are, according to Harvey (2009), tethered to extant "common sense" beliefs, (e.g. that we are all 'in favour of equality', Lumby & Muijs, 2013) which ensure that policy is readily accepted or even goes unnoticed. For example, in their study of school leadership and equity in Canada, Goddard and Hart (2007) discovered that policy on leadership for social justice was being tethered to a "common sense" discourse of equality of opportunity that was, the authors claimed, detrimental to minority groups. Although visible to Goddard and Hart (2007), the consolidation of the majority group's power through the implementation of policy on school leadership and equity was, it seems, invisible to the implementers. It appears, therefore, that if policy makers tether policy to extant "common sense" beliefs, then the ability of policy implementers to interrogate and challenge policy is significantly undermined.

In summary, policy response might be defined as the interaction of a new idea with policy implementers' existing ideology: the extent to which policy is accepted is determined by the level of resonance between the incoming idea and the beliefs, desires and instincts of its recipients, irrespective of whether this idea is, in actuality, detrimental to the interests of particular members of society. In the next section of this paper, we consider how policy on school leadership and equity is implemented in Scotland. It is not an easy task to determine how policy is translated into practice, as "policy is both contested and changing, always in a state of "becoming", of "was" and "never was" and "not quite" (Ball, 1993, p. 11). Nevertheless, we attempt to trace a route from the "source" of Scottish policy on school leadership and equity to the "estuary" of contemporary provision.

## **Starting the conversation about school leadership and equity in Scotland**

Of course, an idea such as school leadership and equity does not have a single starting point, but is the product of the blending and clashing of other ideas, the origins of which are, in many cases, lost in time (Barthes, 2001). This means that we must select what may be considered to be an arbitrary starting point for our investigation of the implementation of school leadership and equity in Scotland. We therefore begin by looking back to 2006, when the Scottish Government asked the OECD to examine the extent to which all pupils in Scotland were receiving a high standard of education. This moment is significant, as it signals Scotland's commitment to neoliberalism (discussed later). The resultant report, *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland* (OECD, 2007) contains the following headline statement:

Children from poorer communities and low socio-economic status homes are more likely than others to under-achieve, while the gap associated with poverty and deprivation in local government areas appears to be very wide...Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend, so far as achievement differences on international tests are concerned. (OECD, 2007, p. 15)

The OECD report mentions the nascent Curriculum for Excellence, and expresses hope that this curriculum might address issues of equity in Scottish education: this suggests that a “conversation” around pupils’ performance was taking in place in Scotland at this time, and that the OECD was one of a number of voices contributing to this dialogue. In 2009 the Scottish Government invited Graham Donaldson to join to this conversation by conducting a review of teacher education in Scotland. In his ensuing report, *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson, 2011), Donaldson duly recapitulates the OECD's (2007)'s claim that, ‘In Scotland, who you are is far more important than what school you attend’, and that ‘the school system as a whole is not strong enough to make this not matter’ (ibid, 2011, p. 17). Seeking to understand and address this apparent weakness in the Scottish school system, Donaldson “replies” to the OECD by stating that ‘the foundations of successful education lie in the quality of teachers and their leadership’(ibid, p. 2).

It should be noted that the Executive Summary of the OECD (2007) report does not include school leadership in its 18 Recommendations, and we might

therefore argue that it was Donaldson who brought together the two conceptions of equity and school leadership. However, as demonstrated in Ward *et al's* (2013) review of the literature on school leadership and equity, the linking of these concepts is global and predates Donaldson's report by many years. Nevertheless, it was Donaldson's report that inspired the Scottish Government to establish the National Partnership Group (NPG) to implement his recommendations, making Donaldson (rather than earlier testimonies) the trigger for action. The NPG Sub-Group 3 duly declared that 'High quality leadership is crucial to improving the experiences and outcomes for learners' (NPG, 2012, p. 18), and proposed a Framework for Educational Leadership in Scotland. This framework, to be implemented from 2013, 'will offer high quality leadership opportunities to support a range of leaders, from aspiring to experienced, in identifying professional learning opportunities which will enable them to grow and develop as leaders' (NPG, 2012, pp.18-19).

In order to support the Framework for Educational Leadership in Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) published its own report, *Standards for Leadership and Management: supporting leadership and management development* (GTCS, 2012). As might be expected, the GTCS report refers to both Donaldson (2011) and the NPG (2012), claiming that that 'Leadership is central to educational quality' (GTCS, 2012, p. 1) and that a commitment to social justice is part of a teacher's 'core' being (ibid, p. 4). The GTCS report may, therefore, be read as a reiteration and expansion of the ideas contained in Donaldson (2011) and the NPG (2012).

In order to appreciate the alacrity of the establishment of the concept of leadership in the discourse of Scottish education, we might consider the evaluation of the Flexible Route to Headship (FRH) pilot project, which was funded by the Scottish Government in parallel with the OECD's (2007) investigation into schooling in Scotland. The authors of this evaluation, which was conducted in 2007-2008, 'were unable to find any explicit statement about leadership or reference to a preferred leader prototype that informed the thinking behind the FRH pilot' (Davidson *et al*, 2008, p. 12). Just a few years later, statements about leadership were ubiquitous.

So, we can see that by creating a dialogue around school improvement and inviting different groups and individuals to contribute to this conversation, the Scottish Government has played a key role in enabling the introduction of a novel idea (i.e. school leadership) to enter into, and thereby alter, the existing ideology of equity and standards. In the next section of this paper, we look at policy on school leadership and equity in Scotland, in order to consider the practices that this policy makes possible, and what it prohibits.

### **What may, and may not, be**

The Standards for Leadership and Management will supersede the Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2012, p. 2), and are intended to complement the fledgling Framework for Educational Leadership. The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) defines leadership as:

...the ability to develop a vision for change, which leads to improvements in outcomes for learners and is based on shared values and robust evaluation of evidence of current practice, [and the ability to] mobilise, enable and support others to develop and follow through on strategies for achieving that change. (GTCS, 2012, p. 2)

It defines management as 'the operational implementation and maintenance of the practices and systems required to achieve this change' (ibid, p.2). According to the GTCS, head teachers must commit to:

...the principles of democracy and social justice through fair, transparent, inclusive and sustainable practices in relation to: age, disability, gender and gender identity, race, religion and belief and sexual orientation. (GTCS, 2012, p. 4)

It is apparent, then, that the GTCS believes that school leaders have a responsibility for equity in Scottish education, and prescribes a set of practices to ensure that school leaders fulfil this duty. In order to understand how the GTCS has come to hold this belief, we might re-examine the "conversation" instigated by the Scottish Government, discussed earlier. As stated previously, the Scottish Government *invited* the OECD to conduct an investigation of Scottish schools, and since the OECD is a well known proponent of neoliberalism (Connolly, 2013), we may therefore assume that Scottish politicians were actively seeking neoliberal policy recommendations. This desire was fully satisfied: in its report the OECD (2007, p. 16) acknowledges that 'deprivation intensifies the effects of family socio-economic

status', and that poverty is linked with poor educational attainment, but makes no policy recommendations around the eradication of poverty. Instead, the OECD suggests that equality of results might be obtained through management practices:

Schools should be able to build the mix of staffing they need to tackle the particular challenges they face and to offer programmes which best address these challenges. Greater management freedom in these two areas [the curriculum and teaching resources] needs to be part of a compact with local government which establishes expectations in exchange for autonomy, and encourages and protects innovation and risk-taking through an authoritative mandate. (OECD, 2007, p.16)

Thus, while the OECD *itself* acknowledges that educational underperformance is bound up with poverty, it ensures that the conversation about Scottish education does not involve discussion of non-neoliberal policy, such as the redistribution of wealth, by positioning school management as the solution to Scotland's alleged problems. When Donaldson (2011) and others joined this debate, they too positioned school management as the solution to inequity, and thus implicitly ruled out other responses to social injustice, such as progressive taxation. Interestingly, the ease with which consensus coalesced around the idea that inequity is a problem that should be "managed" by school leaders indicates that the OECD's managerial recommendations resonated with existing beliefs and values in Scotland. Arguably, this consensus validates Poulantzas' identification of a new form of governance based upon the 'combination of decentralised operational management and detailed central regulation', which has come to be known as 'the new public management' (Jones *et al*, 2008, p. 22).

The re-imagining of social justice as a private matter that requires behavioural management, rather than a public matter that requires economic intervention, is consistent with the neoliberal belief that 'There is no such thing as society' (Thatcher,1987). However, the emergence of this new public management theory has not been accompanied by a slackening of government control over social policy. In fact, Jones *et al* (2008, p. 22) argue that contemporary education policy is 'tightly connected to state objectives'. Indeed, policies on such things as school leadership and equity, which *leave intact* structural constraints on social mobility, may be described as the deliberate manifestation of a "winner takes all" conception of human interaction. According to Jones *et al*:

Governments seek undoubtedly to *manage* social difference, through educational and social programmes of many kinds, but the idea that high

levels of inequality are both objectionable and eradicable has no place in policy. (Jones *et al*, 2008, pp. 23-24, italics in original)

Of course, policy documents do not proclaim that inequality is neither objectionable nor eradicable: as stated previously, policy makers take pains to ensure that policy appears virtuous, and it is perhaps a mistake to suppose that policy that denies social justice is simply imposed by government on the populace. Lumby and Muijs (2013, p. 14) define the state as not just the formal government apparatus, but ‘as the will of the dominant majority that functions both to pursue advantage and to disguise self-interest at a cost to others’, and they claim that interest groups, such as parents and educators, are able to use policy in a way that ‘sustains current educational inequalities’. By positioning education as a commodity that is bound-up with individual advantage, the ‘dominant majority’ (Lumby & Muijs, *ibid*) have cultivated receptivity to neoliberal education policy that erodes the interests of marginal groups and re-assigns accountability for social justice. We borrow from Jessop’s (2002, p. 199) term ‘*destatization*’ to argue that neoliberalism has created a “de-stated” model of governance, in which individuals are given responsibility for social issues that were, under the previous welfare model, considered to be the responsibility of the state, defined as the ‘formal government apparatus’ (Lumby & Muijs, 2013, p 14). Under “de-stated” governance, the state no longer takes responsibility for such things as social mobility, but instead “manages”, or oversees, the operation of the free market which ostensibly delivers outcomes that are favourable to the interests of individuals. The new public management system of central regulation and decentralised operational management (Jones, *et al*, 2008, p.22) places pressure on social agents to take responsibility for issues assigned to them by government, and policy on school leadership and equity, which obliges local school leaders to “govern” social justice in the free market society, is an example of this pressure.

In summary, policy must resonate with implementers’ existing ideology in order for new ideas to find a receptive audience, yet this ideology is carefully orchestrated, rather than accidental. Neoliberalism has not attained international approval through happenstance: Milton Friedman (2002, p.p. xiii-xiv), one of the most celebrated neo-liberal thinkers, boasted of the strategy of waiting patiently for a crisis to occur, developing neoliberal ‘alternatives to existing policies’ and keeping them ‘alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically

inevitable.’ In the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s, proponents of neoliberalism have been invited by successive governments around the world to contribute to policy conversations around areas of concern (such as the performance of Scottish schools), and via these conversations neoliberals have incrementally marginalised welfarist policy responses and thereby ensured that the neoliberal response is the “common sense” and ‘politically inevitable’ position (ibid). Thus while there is protest over some education policies, such as the vote of no confidence in English education reforms that was passed in 2013 by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), neoliberal policies are largely accepted as a bitter but necessary medicine to cure an alleged malaise (Charteris-Black 2005).

### **From words to action**

In order to understand how conversations about policy are translated into action in Scottish schools, it is necessary to identify Scotland’s key educational decision makers, listed below:

- Scottish Parliament: education is a devolved matter so is the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, not Westminster (although Scotland is bound by UK policy on such things as discrimination).
- Scottish Government: has a Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and two Ministers, one for Learning and Skills and one for Children and Young People.
- Education Scotland: an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government, which is charged with developing the Curriculum for Scottish Schools.
- Local Authorities: Scotland has 32 Local Authorities that administer and run state education in a comprehensive system (N.B there are no grammar schools in Scotland).
- The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA): representative body of the 32 Local Authorities.
- General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS): a statutory professional regulatory body for teachers in Scotland. Teachers in state schools are legally obliged to register with the GTCS.

- Scottish Teacher Education Committee (STEC): eight Scottish universities (plus the Open University) are directly involved in teacher education in Scotland, and work together through STEC.
- Scottish universities: some of these deliver the Scottish Qualification for Headship programme (accredited by the GTCS). Aberdeen covers the North, Edinburgh covers the East and a consortium of Glasgow, Strathclyde and Stirling covers the West.
- Colleges Scotland: represents Scotland's colleges of further education.
- Teachers Unions: the largest is the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), which represents teachers from pre-school through to Higher Education. The second largest is the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA), which represents only secondary teachers.
- Head Teacher Unions: School Leaders Scotland (for secondary); The Association of Heads and Deputies (for primary).
- Scottish Council of Independent Schools (N.B. only 4% of Scottish pupils attend independent schools).
- The Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT): a tripartite body consisting of the Scottish Government, the Unions (dominated by the EIS and COSLA, which determines teachers' pay and conditions).
- Think Tanks: as with most countries, Scotland has various "independent" think tanks, e.g. Reform Scotland and the Centre for Scottish Public Policy.
- Parents, who have two representative bodies: the National Parent Forum of Scotland and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council.

As we have seen, the Scottish Government has played a central role in developing policy on school leadership and equity in Scotland, but its thinking is informed by the other bodies mentioned above. In their analysis of policy machinery, Bates *et al* (2011, p. 41) identify how policy 'ownership' is crucial to implementation. According to this theory, a dispersed, rather than top-down, model of implementation is more likely to ensure that various stakeholders (e.g. parents and local authorities) view policy as benign, rather than an alien interloper, and terms such as 'influential stakeholders' and 'policy community' (ibid, p. 42) are used to describe the multitude of individuals who must be "onboard" with a policy message in order for it to be

embraced. Policy ownership is encouraged through such things as consultations (e.g. the GTCS has a Consultation page on its website, dedicated to soliciting and publishing views on policy) and conferences (e.g. School Leaders Scotland holds an annual conference), and of course policy documents such as *Standards for Leadership and Management* (GTCS, 2012) play a key role in recruiting stakeholders' support. Interestingly, it has been argued that policy networks, such as our own EPNoSL, 'are displacing hierarchy and markets and developing as the dominant mode of governance and social organisation' (Ball, 2012, p. 7), meaning that we ourselves are playing an increasingly important role in the formation of policy consensus.

### **Our empirical study**

The GTCS (2012) report, *Standards for Leadership and Management*, sets out the Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland. We aim to conduct interviews with head teachers and to undertake case studies to discover how school leaders are interpreting and implementing this policy, and our resultant analysis of the Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland will form the UK strand of the research theme 'Policy response - for equity and learning' in WP4 of the second stage of EPNoSL. Without wishing to pre-empt our findings, we acknowledge Humes' (2003) assessment of policy implementation in post-devolution Scotland:

Whatever the origins and implementations of educational policies, in the final analysis their success or failure depends on the expertise and commitment of individual teachers in schools and other educational institutions across the country. (Humes, 2003, p. 84)

Our discussion has shown how the commitment of individual head teachers is likely to reflect neoliberal ideology, which promotes the interests of the advantaged whilst appearing to champion the interests of the disadvantaged, yet even so there is scope for resistance to "common sense" assumptions about social justice.

Ultimately, head teachers' acceptance of the Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland is dependent upon the resonance between their beliefs about social justice and the managerial solutions to inequity proposed by the wider policy discourse in which these Standards are located. According to Humes' theory, if our empirical investigation reveals a lack of commitment to the Standards amongst head

teachers, then this particular policy is likely to meet with resistance or be radically reinterpreted.

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