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# Policymaking in Education: Understanding Influences on the Reading Excellence Act


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**Abstract**

Educators and researchers are being called to participate in language and literacy policy making (Roller & Long, 2001). In order to do so, however, there needs to be an understanding of how policy is made. Although policymaking often appears to be an irrational process, there are theories that exist to explain the influences and mechanisms that work to shape policies. In what follows, I adapt Theodoulou and Cahn's (1995) typology on policymaking in order to discuss how policy is made. These theories of policy making are explored within the context of the Reading Excellence Act to demonstrate how policymaking is read and explained. Given the limitations of these explanations, particularly the sense that there may be no explicit role for educators in such a process, an alternate theory of policymaking, critical pluralism, is proposed. This alternate typology suggests different roles for educators in relation to policymaking.

> "History gives democracy no advantages. All democracies are weak and short-lived, and no actually existing democracy is an ideal democracy. Most are minimalist democracies: most adults are allowed to vote in elections that are more or less fair, by which representatives, most of them rich, win their seats in visual media performances. Attempting in the face of this to educate for principled democratic activism – for enlightened political engagement – is ambitious, yet a moral necessity."(Parker, 2003, p. 52)

Public policy touches all aspects of our lives, some in ways we appreciate and others in ways we do not. Stone (1997) defines policy as a rational attempt to obtain objectives; and indeed a policy is a set of objectives that legitimize the values, beliefs, and attitudes of its authors (Prunty, 1985). By design, policy making in a democracy is intended to be a process whereby those who are governed can participate in their government (see Dahl, 1998), contributing to the authorship of policy. In the U.S., there are elected representatives who are supposed to be accessible to citizens and take citizen concerns into account when making policies. Likewise, there are opportunities to participate in citizens groups, to testify to government committees, and to write letters in the editorial pages of our local newspapers. Yet, the ideal of 'enlightened political engagement' that Parker notes above seems to be elusive and difficult to achieve. Powerful influences that range from corporations to interest groups and political dynasties make meaningful participation seem out of reach for many ordinary citizens (see Metcalf, 2002; Palast, 2002; Suskind, 2004 among others), while other challenges to democracy, including the difficulty of achieving consensus, the demands involved on people's time, and the need for a well-informed citizenry (see Dahl, 1998), make involvement in policy making seem an unreasonable, perhaps utopian, ideal. Yet, in spite of the challenges, educators are being encouraged to participate in policy making in order to make a difference in the goals and directions of particular policies (Eisenhart and Towne, 2003; Roller and Long, 2001).

At the same time, as educators, we seem to have little strategic knowledge of policymaking processes. More than a decade ago, reading researcher Patrick Shannon (1991) noted that "we have few sophisticated answers to even the most basic policy questions that could be posed about federal, state and citizen influences on the organization and process of reading instruction" (p. 159). He raised important questions that still remain largely unanswered today. Specifically, Shannon asked who the policy insiders were and why they had particular influence, which agencies and organizations held sway over policy, and what the consequences of reading policies might be for teachers, students and researchers.

To begin to approach these questions, and to untangle some of the influences and processes concerning education policymaking, I will use Theodolou and Cahn's (1995) policy typology to explain some of key the influences on the Reading Excellence Act. In particular, the typology suggests how different individuals and groups effect policy conceptualization and policymaking based on political theory and policy study. The four broad and somewhat overlapping areas Theodolou and Cahn consider are: pluralism, elite theory, corporatism, and subgovernment theories (see Figure 1 for an overview of these theories). While none offer one correct way to view policy per se, they each offer explanations that make clear various influences on policy making, which in turn suggest different roles and possibilities for educators' participation in these events. Each area of the typology has shortcomings as well. For this reason, a fifth area of the typology, critical pluralism, suggests ways that educators may become more strategically involved in influencing policy.

**Figure 1. Theodoulou & Cahn (1995) policymaking typology**

| Theory | Description |
|---|---|
| **Pluralism** | This theory of policy making argues that policy is a struggle among groups. Various groups in society (social, economic, ethnic, etc.) put pressure on government to produce policies favorable to them. This theory is associated with work by political scientists David Truman (1971) and Robert Dahl (1967). |
| **Elite Theory** | Policies are made by relatively small groups of influential leaders who share similar beliefs. Policy is determined by the preferences of a "power elite" (see C. Wright Mills, 1956; also see work by Ralph Miliband, 1969; Tyack & Cuban, 1995.) |
| **Corporatism** | These theories explain policymaking as influenced by interest groups that become part of the decision-making and implementation system. In this way, groups help to manage society for the state or government. Philippe Schmitter (see Schmitter & Lehmbruch, 1979) is most associated with these theories. |
| **Subgovernments** | These theories endorse a view of policymaking whereby sections of government work with interest groups. The result, coalitions of Congress members, bureaucracy and interest groups, develop policies around specialized areas of interest. Hugh Heclo (1978) writes about policymaking according to this theory. |

I consider these policy making theories within the context of the Reading Excellence Act because this policy is in our recent past, but it is no longer being contested or influenced by political factors, as is the case with No Child Left Behind and other current policies. Looking back to the Reading Excellence Act allows a policy case study to demonstrate the various explanations of how this policy was made and what the influences on it were. In the

end, my hope is that this piece will work to inform educators about policy making and to begin discussions concerning the ways in which these processes need to be changed.

## The Reading Excellence Act

Initiated by Representative Bill Goodling (R-Pennsylvania), Chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, the Reading Excellence Act was proposed at the beginning of President Clinton's second term in office, on the heels of Clinton's America Reads Challenge literacy initiative (see Edmondson, 2000). Both occurred within a context of increasing expressed concern about American children's reading ability as evidenced by scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests (Riley, 1996). Considered by some to be a Republican response to America Reads (Education Week, May 7, 1997), the Reading Excellence Act included four major goals: 1) Teach every child to read in their early childhood years, not later than the third grade; 2) Improve the reading skills of students and the instructional practices of teachers through the use of findings from reliable, replicable research in reading, including phonics; 3) Expand the number of high-quality family literacy programs; 4) Reduce the number of children who are inappropriately referred to special education due to reading difficulties (S1293, 1998). The legislation was proposed in a sociopolitical context of neoliberal influences whereby reading was conceptualized as part of a reading success equation that would secure America's place in the lead of the globalized economy (see Edmondson & Shannon, 1998; Clinton and Gore, 1992). The Reading Excellence Act was the first legislation to explicitly define reading and research through federal education policy (Eisenhart and Towne, 2003). Of course this action was not without controversy or consequences (see Goodman, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Garan, 2001).

In what follows, four policymaking theories to explain influences on the Reading Excellence Act will be offered, all with careful consideration of the groups and individuals who influenced this legislation (see Figure 1). My hope is that the explanations and questions offered might provide educators with different examples of how to read and understand policymaking, and in turn move educators closer to Parker's call for "principled democratic activism" and "enlightened political engagement."

## The Letter Writing Campaign: Pluralist Attempts to Influence Policy

As word spread in December 1997 that the House version of the Reading Excellence Act (H.R. 2614) passed by voice vote (see Goodman, 1999), educators and researchers across the country launched a massive letter-writing campaign in opposition to the legislation. Of particular concern was the legislation's language as it defined reading primarily as a skill requiring decoding and comprehension strategies, and approved research as that which was 'reliable and replicable' (see Figure 2). Educators and researchers across the U.S. perceived these definitions to be both limited and limiting (see Goodman, 1999; Taylor, 1998 for examples of these expressed concerns). The terms were limited in the sense that they did not capture the breadth and complexity found in the field at large, and they were limiting because they excluded these different perspectives from consideration.

In an attempt to influence the policy before it proceeded through the Senate, individuals wrote letters to their respective representatives, and professional organizations drafted official responses. The National Council of Teachers of English, the National Research Council, and the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy,

**Figure 2. Reading Excellence Act: Changes in language from House to Senate versions of Bill (definitions are quoted directly from the legislative text available at http://thomas.loc.gov)**

| | House | Senate |
|---|---|---|
| Definition of reading | The term "reading" means the process of comprehending the meaning of written text by depending on –<br>(A) the ability to use phonics skills, that is, knowledge of letters and sounds, to decode printed words quickly and effortlessly, both silently and aloud;<br>(B) the ability to use previously learned strategies for reading comprehensions; and<br>(C) the ability to think critically about the meaning, message, and aesthetic value of the text. | The term "reading" means a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following:<br>(A) the skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print;<br>(B) the ability to decode unfamiliar words<br>(C) the ability to read fluently<br>(D) sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension<br>(E) the development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print<br>(F) the development and maintenance of a motivation to read. |
| Definition of research | Reliable, replicable research – the term "reliable, replicable research" means objective, valid scientific studies that –<br>(A) include rigorously defined samples of subjects that are sufficiently large and representative to support the general conclusions drawn;<br>(B) rely on measurements that meet established standards of reliability and validity;<br>(C) test competing theories, where multiple theories exist;<br>(D) are subjected to peer review before their results are published; and<br>(E) discover effective strategies for improving reading skills. | Scientifically-based reading research – the term "scientifically based reading research" –<br>(A) means the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties; and<br>(B) shall include research that<br>(i)employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment;<br>(ii)involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn;<br>(iii)relies on measurements or observational methods that provide data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and<br>(iv)has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review |

representing over 100,000 educators, drafted a statement that included the following points, among others:

> Neither Congress nor any federal agency should establish a single definition of reading or restrict the type of research used in funding criteria for preservice or inservice teacher education and professional development programs….
>
> Neither Congress nor any federal agency should establish a national reading curriculum or a national reading program…
>
> Neither Congress nor any federal agency should impose an agenda that restricts investigation to any single definition of reading or any single research model…
> (a summary of this statement can be found at
> http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/gov/107478.htm)

The statement concluded with a template letter that members of these organizations could send to their representatives.

The letter writing campaign in opposition to the Reading Excellence Act provides an example of pluralist attempts to influence policy. Pluralism involves various social, economic, and ethnic groups competing with one another to shape and produce policies that are favorable to them (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995; Truman, 1971, and Dahl, 1967). In this way, public policy is made through interactions among various constituents as power circulates among policy actors who, at least in theory, can be representative of society as large. According to pluralist theories, policy is a struggle among groups. These groups have multiple centers of power (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995) that circulates across the various constituents involved in the policy development and implementation (see Foucault, 1980 for explanations of power). Based in part on Rousseau's (1968) ideas that the 'ruled should be the rulers,' the goal of policy making from this perspective is for broad participation to generate new knowledge that will result in policies that reflect the interests of diverse groups in society.

Some policy researchers argue that pluralism has lost power as interest groups gain increasing control of American politics (see Lowi, 1964, 1979). While some groups in education may not have the requisite 'language' to participate in policymaking decisions (see Roller and Long, 2001), others may be systematically excluded because they do not have the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) needed to find a seat at the metaphorical policy table (see also Parker, 2003).

Richard Long, the International Reading Association's (IRA) government relation's liaison offered one perspective on the loss of power held by pluralist groups in relation to influencing policymaking. Long explained that the Reading Excellence Act letter writing campaign was ineffective and largely misunderstood by legislators (personal communication, November 24, 2003). While he offers but one view of this event from his position as liaison, he observed that members of the House of Representatives perceived the letter-writing campaign as accusing them of setting out to hurt children, and some letters called specific researchers liars. In addition, Representative Bill Goodling felt harassed by late-night phone calls (Taylor, 1998). According to Long, these ineffective letters and strategies could be perceived as doing more harm than good since they potentially interfered with IRA or any other group's ability to intervene in the policy making process. Long's observation, which suggests that pluralist approaches to policymaking are ineffective and that instead policy

making should occur through the influence of professional organizations, reflects a second typology on policymaking from Theodoulou and Cahn's framework.

## The Role of Professional Organizations in Policymaking: An Example of Corporatism

Corporatism, a second explanation of how policies are made, assumes that interest groups are influential participants in this process (see Schmitter and Lehmbruck, 1969). In this way, businesses, professional organizations, and corporations have significant power to shape public policy content and implementation. Within this model, policies are negotiated bargains among and across these potentially powerful groups (Dryzek, 1996).

The International Reading Association's influence on the language of the Reading Excellence Act legislation provides an example of policies being made through such influences. According to Richard Long, IRA spent considerable time working with Congress members, and when the House version of the Reading Excellence Act was first discussed among the Senate education committee staff, members were looking for a more balanced approach, they did not want the federal government to define reading, and they were aware of the limitations of research. At the same time, they were frustrated with schools that had continuing low scores on reading tests, and they wanted to provide more funds to schools in need of money for professional development. As changes were made to the House version of the bill, there was a brief window of opportunity for changes to be made (Long, personal communication, November 24, 2003). Because of the influence IRA could exert, some of the language in the House version of the bill was changed in the Senate version (see Figure 2). In spite of this, many IRA members were not pleased with the organization's involvement and questioned whether the changes in the legislation really represented the views of the profession at large (Taylor, 1999; Goodman, 1999). Many questions remain about the role professional organizations might play in influencing policies, including whose voices among the constituency these organizations should represent.

A major concern of corporatism as it influences policy is the potential for vast political and economic inequalities to result. Robert Dahl (1985) noted how this approach tends to:

> produce inequalities in social and economic resources so great as to bring about severe violations of political equality and hence of the democratic process. (as quoted in Held, 1996, p. 214)

Corporate influences on policymaking limit the participants and narrow the purposes in ways that potentially serve profit and limit policy options (see Lindblom, 1977, Dahl, 1985). Critics of corporatism argue that it lends itself to 'crony capitalism' by creating direct ties between business and government, which in turn weakens the social contract as government agendas and priorities are directed away from the needs and interests of the citizens in a democratic society (see Held, 1996; Palast, 2002).

Corporations, interest groups, and professional organizations are not the only influences on public policy. Groups within government can also work to influence policy. In the case of the Reading Excellence Act, the influence of the National Institutes for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) was apparent as this subgovernment group's

research influenced the language and intent of the legislation. This policy influence is discussed in more detail next.

## NICHD: Questioning Subgovernment Theories

Subgovernment theories explain how subsections of the government work in conjunction with business and other groups to formulate policy. These 'iron triangle' theories (see Heclo, 1978) reflect how coalitions of Congress members, bureaucracy, and interest groups (typically business or labor) work to develop policy around specialized areas of interest. These groups can hold a monopoly on expertise and influence that make it difficult, if not impossible for ordinary citizens to participate (Dryzek, 1996). Some policy researchers consider subgovernment theories of policy making to be outmoded as more diverse groups work to influence policy (see Theodoulou and Cahn, 1995); however, the point that groups within or closely affiliated with the government make and shape policy is an important aspect of policymaking to consider.

Before the Reading Excellence Act was penned, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the National Institutes of Health G. Reid Lyon, a research psychologist whose doctorate from the University of New Mexico included an emphasis in developmental neuropsychology and special education, worked to influence states about the need to teach reading through direct and systematic instruction (see Taylor, 1998). One example of this influence occurred in 1997 when Lyon testified to the House of Representatives' Committee on Education and the Workforce and its chair, Rep. Bill Goodling. In his testimony, Lyon advocated for NICHD-based research findings in reading, particularly the notion that children needed to have fast and accurate decoding of words in order to read well. Lyon's ideas about reading were grounded in research funded by NICHD, summarized by Grossen (1997) and later critiqued by Allington and Woodside-Jiron (1998). Prominent researchers funded by NICHD included Barbara Foorman and Marilyn Adams (see Garan, 2002 for an explanation of these connections).

Lyon's definition of reading and research were evident in the Reading Excellence Act (Goodman, 1999; Taylor, 1998). His influence surfaced explicitly when Rep. Goodling later testified before the House of Representatives on October 6, 1997 advocating for the Reading Excellence Act. He cited Lyon's testimony:

> Dr. Reid Lyon … testified before the committee that fewer than 10 percent of our Nation's teachers have an adequate understanding of how reading develops or how to provide reading instruction to struggling readers. (Congressional Record, October 6, 1997)

Senator Ted Kennedy similarly cited Reid Lyon in his statement in opposition to the House version of the Reading Excellence Act:

> Doctor Lyon testified that: Learning to read requires different skills at different levels of development. . . . It does not have anything to do with philosophy, and it does not have anything to do with politics. It has to do with making sure the kids get the ideas. That is it. . . . To be able to read our language, you have to know the sounds. You have got to know how to map it onto the letters . . . you have got to do it quickly, and you have got to know why you are reading and have good vocabulary ... It is never an either/or. (June 26, 1998, Congressional Record)

Steven Strauss (2001), a linguist and neurologist, questioned the subgovernment processes at work in reading policy in his open letter to G. Reid Lyon, published in *Educational Researcher*. Strauss critiqued the NICHD agenda in literacy research under Lyon's leadership, and he questioned its relationship with the Business Roundtable (see also McDaniels and Miskel, 2002) in influencing literacy education policies. Strauss expressed concern about the consequences of this iron triangle as he noted how the:

> dovetailing of [NICHD's] work with the strictly business agenda of corporate America obligates us to question whether you really do welcome challenge from academic folks, not to mention the academic and research community, and if your goals are ultimately in their interest. (p. 32)

As Strauss (2001) pointed out, NICHD's agenda has been powerful in limiting policy to narrow visions of research and practice in reading research and education.

Problems with subgovernment approaches to policy making relate to the shared interests among and across these groups who make policy. In other words, there are limited possibilities for broad coalitions to form around policy issues. Some feel these iron triangles result in bad policies that waste taxpayer money (Dryzek, 1996). NICHD's relationship to reading research and policies as well as corporations (including McGraw-Hill's Open Court, and Robert Sweet, professional staff member for the majority members of the House Education and Workforce Committee and founder of the National Right to Read Foundation) raise important questions about the legislative decisions made for reading education and teachers, particularly when we consider the 'cozy' relationships some businesses and organizations have to individuals and groups in the U.S. government (see Metcalf, 2002).

## Who Decides? Exploring Elite Theories

Across the corporate and subgovernment influences on policymaking, there is also evidence that elite individuals and groups can have an effect on policies. Elite theories explain policy making as limited in participation to those influential leaders who hold similar views and goals, both ideological and political, that are protected largely through their power and political maneuvering (Miliband, 1969; Mills, 1956; Suskind, 2004; Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As subgovernment groups influence panels that develop reports for the public and/or Congress (such as the National Research Council's *Preventing Reading Difficulties* report or the National Reading Panel's *Teaching Children to Read*), for example, the selection process is purposely aimed at bringing together like-minded and influential leaders. As Alexandra Wigdor from the National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council explained to the National Reading Panel members during the first meeting:

> Members of our committees are selected for their expertise, period… That is the first criterion. Given that we then select members to try to have a rich and valuable representation of age, region, ethnicity, and obviously the various scientists that need to be there but the primary criterion is always expertise. Members do no sit on our committee as representative of any group or any community of interests, or any policy position and, indeed, we make a rather big deal at the beginning of the committee process of making sure that the committee members understand that they have to leave their political enthusiasms at the door. (p. 12, lines 5 – 16)

Through such processes, it is possible to bring together like-minded individuals who can formulate consensual policy and influence public opinion as they work under the auspices of governmental agencies. The National Research Council's expert panel and subsequent report *Preventing Reading Difficulties* was being organized and written at the same time the Reading Excellence Act was under consideration, and reports of this nature, as well as reports commissioned from Congress (the National Reading Panel report) can and do serve as a powerful policy lever (Allington and Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Eisenhart and Towne, 2003).

While Theodoulou and Cahn (1995) treat elite theories in relation to individuals, particular groups, like NICHD, likewise have an elite function in relation to policy making as they have a measure of prestige and access to policy makers that are not available to ordinary citizens. In this way, policy can serve the preferences and ideals of those who hold power in society, systematically silencing non-mainstream voices and interests as the status quo is perpetuated. Joseph Schumpeter (1976), a former Minister of Finance in Austria and a Harvard economics professor, explained:

> If all the people in the short run can be 'fooled' step by step into something they do not really want, and if this is not an exceptional case which we could afford to neglect, then no amount of retrospective common sense will alter the fact that in reality they neither raise nor decide issues but that the issues that shape their fate are normally raised and decided for them. (p. 264)

Within this model, policies consist of authoritative and prescriptive statements that reflect the values and goals of those powerful few, often without serious consideration of others. In this way, policy is influenced and made efficiently among a like-minded 'power elite' (Mills, 1956). Critics of elite policy making theories argue that too much power in the hands of a relatively small number of people produces policies that do not reflect the will of the general populace and thereby produces/reproduces inequities in public policy and society at large.

Theodoulou and Cahn's (1995) framework helps us to recognize some of the key groups and individuals who influenced the making of the Reading Excellence Act. Controversy about this legislation reflected shortcomings in each of the approaches to policy making, most notably the concern about whose voice and interests are left out of the policymaking process and the vision for society that it elucidates. These expressed concerns about omissions in the influences on policy and subsequent limitations of the policy raise important questions about the consequences of policy in reading education.

## Considering New Possibilities

An alternative approach to the above-mentioned policymaking models can be found in critical pluralism (see Figure 3 for a summary), which applies critical theory to pluralist notions that value participatory democratic involvement in policy making. Engaging this alternative model highlights different aspects and questions around policy making and policy makers, and it offers different possibilities for engaging in and influencing policy content. Critical pluralism involves three key aspects: 1) knowledge of policy and policymaking through alternative approaches to policy study; 2) critical understandings of trends and issues in relation to ideological and political contexts, and 3) political strategies that direct social action in relation to policy study.

**Figure 3. Overview of critical pluralism**

| **Critical pluralism** | |
|---|---|
| **Definition of policy** | Policies are human constructions that are value-laden, authoritative visions for society. Policies should be evaluated through different perspectives to ensure broad understandings of policy and policy contexts. |
| **Policy makers** | Strategic intervention in policy making processes by coalitions among populace who attend to values and power inherent in policy issues. |
| **Goals** | Broad participation in policy making. Egalitarian policies that serve the interests of many in society. |
| **Requirements** | 1. Requires a populace that is well-informed about issues, willing to participate, and able to educate legislators and policy makers about policy matters.<br>2. Requires pragmatic understandings about the potential consequences of policy.<br>3. Requires critical analysis of the present in order to influence policy in strategic ways. |

## Knowledge of policy and policymaking through policy study

Patrick Shannon (1991) explained three types of policy research in reading education: policy-driven, communication, and critical. Each is essential for informed engagement in policy debates. Policy driven research, or functionalist policy study (see Edmondson, 2002) is directed toward "conducting experiments and program evaluations to obtain empirically valid, straightforward solutions to the complex, practical problems facing reading programs" (p. 161). Such research lends itself to measurement, deductive logic, and empirical/analytic science, and it is this form of research that was sought out by the National Reading Panel. Policy driven research is directed toward questions posed by policy makers, and it establishes researchers as recognized experts in the field. Marginalizing policy driven research would be detrimental to the field of literacy education and research because it would limit knowledge about specifics regarding the application of policy in particular contexts.

A second approach to policy study is policy communications research. Shannon explained this research as a focus on the:

> negotiation aspects of policy making and implementation, particularly the different frames of mind and expectations various groups of participants bring to the policy bargaining table. Such research would investigate how these participants make sense of their daily work and how the rules they use when conducting that work independently can construct barriers to open and effective communications during reading education policy discussions (1991, p. 162)

This type of research is evident in Roller and Long's (2001) explanation of policy making and their subsequent call for researchers to participate in the policymaking process. It relies on naturalistic inquiry, inductive logic, and interpretation of policy events. Not engaging communicative policy research would limit access to the stories and specific details of policy making in literacy education.

A third approach, critical policy study, researches policy as an historical and political phenomenon to consider both what policies offer and what they deny (Shannon, 1991). From a critical perspective, policies are the articulation of some one or some group's vision for the way something should be, and they are revealed through various texts, practices, and discourses that define and deliver these values (Schneider and Ingram, 1997). These articulations name the ways in which groups in society should live together, and they always begin with their authors' images of an ideal society. As such, policies are intended to be procedural and regulative statements to realize that ideal. Ideals are based on values that always have social contexts and histories. Because of this, any discussion of policy must necessarily include considerations of values and ideologies, historical and social contexts, and power and prestige if it is to adequately capture the intricacies of the process. Without critical policy study, the histories and social attachments of policy are not considered, aspects of policy study that raise questions about visions for education in a democracy, social justice, and human rights.

All three forms of policy study are needed in reading education to give broad understandings of the field, including new developments and contexts, and all three are crucial to critical pluralist approaches to policymaking.

**Knowledge of trends and issues in research and education**

In order to influence policy, there needs to be an understanding of present conditions, including how particular circumstances have come to be, who has influenced those circumstances, toward what end, and how they might be changed. Similarly, questions about absences in current policies need to be asked in order to fully understand present conditions. In other words, rather than studying the shadows on cave walls with increasing scrutiny and cleverness in order to find the way out, we must instead consider the ideologies and conditions that make the shadows seem real and reasonable (Plato's metaphor, as explained in Parker, 2003).

Because policy study requires an encompassing understanding of ideologies, trends, and issues education as they relate to political agendas in education (see Spring, 1997 for an extensive explanation of political agendas), responses can and should be ongoing, even before laws are proposed. For this to occur, a critical understanding of the field in relation to societal influences and conditions, including the values and goals of those involved in policymaking processes, are essential. As educators critically understand the issues and ideologies, particularly the broader sociopolitical contexts related to education, there should be a better anticipation of where particular trends will lead. Critical pluralist approaches to policymaking should move educators and researchers beyond reactions to policy and policy making to instead engage pragmatic understandings that allow educators to anticipate the potential consequences of particular policies and trends. Part of this necessarily entails understanding where the power lies, who the key players are, and what their agenda might be, and frameworks such as Theodoulou and Cahn's should help to fully understand these influences. Critical pluralists need to shift the involvement in policy toward crafting policy rather than responding to it.

## Strategic action

Coupled with this focus on understanding policy and issues, there needs to be an engagement of clear political strategies. Three seem to be particularly relevant:

1. Working locally and educating the public does much to affect policy change at a local level that may have ramifications at a national level. If federal policies are indeed influenced by state level policies, as was the case with Minnesota's charter school laws (see Cross, 2004), then these changes at local levels can do much to influence policy making. At the same time, educators need to be savvy about outside influences on state-level policies. The Reading Excellence Act was preceded by changes in California and Texas policies that were precipitated by Robert Sweet's campaign, Barbara Foorman's influence, and others (see Goodman, 1999; Taylor, 1998). Attention must be given to these state-level activities and influences, and flaws and problems with these arguments must be pointed out at early stages in the process of influencing policy.

Related to this, federal policies can be rejected at the state and local level. This takes a degree of civic courage, and some may consider it foolhardy given the desperate financial situations that many schools face. Yet, if the policy is contradictory to the aims and missions of local schools, if the policy potentially sabotages successful local school practices (see Linn, 2003; Edmondson and Shannon, 2003), then local schools should not need to change their practices to conform to federal laws and initiatives. The federal government has no direct say in education, and while the influence of federal policy on state and local education matters by using money as a coercive device is evident at many levels, local schools can reject funding from federal programs. This was most recently evident in communities throughout Pennsylvania who were eligible for but did not apply for Reading First grants because of their restrictive nature.

2. Strategic alliances and coalitions with professional organizations and other groups should be fostered. The International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English played a role in bringing changes to the House version of the Reading Excellence Act. These organizations represent a range of views and positions in relation to reading and language, and they must rely on their memberships to remain viable. As such, it seems to be a responsibility of members to voice concerns and hopes to these groups in relation to policy and policy making. These groups have government liaisons, such as IRAs Richard Long, and they issue position statements and white papers directly related to federal and state policy concerns.

In addition to this, educators must consider how to strategically build coalitions that include public groups (some possibilities include FairTest.org, Parent Teacher Associations, and others) and students (such as the East Philadelphia Organizing Project's Youth United for Change) with the goal of informing the broader public about matters directly related to education. This coalition building can begin effectively at local and state levels to educate and influence local school boards, local representatives, and state policy. This necessarily broadens teachers' 'classrooms' to engage the public sphere with the broader goals of bringing recognition of all groups and voices and redistribution of resources in a more equitable manner (Fraser, 1997).

Related to this, careful attention must be given to ensure that critical pluralism as a process has some degree of success. As Parker (2003) noted, there is tension in the way 'pluribus' manifests itself in liberal democracy as simply tolerating diversity (see also Shannon, 1995). Thoughtful work must be directed toward finding unity in diversity through

the inclusion of voices that are often marginalized or silenced, and we must be willing to "walk the path with other groups" to create a larger public identity that is not essentializing (Parker 2003, p. 27). In this way, education policies should seek to ensure the rights of people to join together to engage difference as diverse groups learn to live with one another in a democratic society.

3. Response to policy must occur on different fronts, particularly attending to those major influences on policy as they are described above. In other words, strategic responses to NICHD, to elite control of policy, and to corporate influences and interest groups are sorely needed. Reading professionals must take a stand on ethical grounds concerning textbook publishing, national panels that are homogenously formed with the same or similar members over time, and groups that wrest control from the public's hands. Unfortunately there are educators who complain about the current state of reading legislation who have participated in some way: as basal reader board members and/or as authors, as members of elite panels, as authors of test items for major testing companies, as players in the standards movement, and more. The contradictory nature of this participation compromises the strength of the stand that can and should be taken for or against particular policies (see Goodman, 1999).

If educators remain committed to the notion that democracy should be participatory (see Sehr, 1998) and that as citizens and educators we should have a voice in the policymaking process, then we must begin to draw on the combined strength of pluralist and critical theories in order to participate well in the policy making that influences education. By attending to the points outlined above, educators can work to create and maintain a participatory democratic society. Of course this is no small matter, as Parker (2003) noted in the quotation that opened this article, and it will require much commitment and hard work for the long term. Yet, if we do not attempt to change the ways in which education policies are made, what might the consequences be?

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