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Curriculum as policy: some implications of
contemporary policy studies for the analysis of
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Anne Looney

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# Curriculum as policy: some implications of contemporary policy studies for the analysis of curriculum policy, with particular reference to post-primary curriculum policy in the Republic of Ireland

ANNE LOONEY

*The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Republic of Ireland*

ABSTRACT

An overview of contemporary curriculum discourse shows a worrying drift to the technical; in current curriculum debates, technique is winning out over substance, procedures over principles. This article shows how this theoretical vacuum is ascribed by many in the field to the dominance of the Tyler rationale in curriculum planning. However, the symptoms of means–end rationality are not confined to curriculum – they are found across the breadth of educational studies and have reached epidemic proportions, suggests the article, in the discourse of educational reform. A number of serious implications for the lack of analysis of curriculum policy are identified and particular reference is made to the Republic of Ireland where, it is suggested, the size of the education system should facilitate greater debate. Instead, the discussions focus on the management rather than the meaning of change. In searching for sources for new curriculum theory, the author suggests that the field of policy studies offers considerable potential, in particular the work of Stephen Ball on mapping the policy cycle. The possibilities for a theory of curriculum as policies are

explored. A model of a curriculum policy cycle is proposed and subjected to some analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

While several attempts have been made to describe and account for curriculum policy in Ireland (Coolahan, 1995; Breathnach, 1997) the task of analysing that policy has been noticeably less popular. Some work has been undertaken on the analysis of policies targeted specifically at educational disadvantage and early school leaving by bodies such as the Combat Poverty Agency (the statutory body responsible for the National Anti-Poverty Strategy) and the Conference of Religious of Ireland (the representative body for religious organizations, including those involved in the ownership or management of schools). However, while Troyna (1994) and others may hail the advent of a new genre of policy studies which focuses on interpreting the 'antecedents, production and orientation of education policy' (3), in Ireland, at least, the broad sweep of curriculum policy remains under-analysed and, as a consequence, under-theorized. Jim Gleeson of the University of Limerick has tried to address this lack of analysis by studying Irish post-primary curriculum policy in the last twenty years. In introducing his analysis he suggests that the most useful analytical tools arise from three key concepts – legitimation, contestation and fragmentation (Gleeson, 2000). He locates these concepts within international curriculum discourse. His ensuing analysis is therefore a *curriculum* analysis of curriculum policy. For this author, working in the field of curriculum policy, an analysis from a *policy* perspective might prove to be of greater value.

What this article sets out to explore is whether an analysis of curriculum policy from a *policy* perspective might offer new insights, not just for the Irish policy context, but for the broader curriculum field, including theorists, researchers and practitioners. This exploratory task has a number of phases. First, a rationale for choosing a policy perspective is suggested. Relevant aspects of the policy studies field are summarized and their implications considered for understanding curriculum policy in the Irish post-primary context. Gleeson's analysis of the Irish curriculum policy context is revisited from a policy perspective. Conclusions are drawn about the possibilities offered by policy analysis for the curriculum field.

## CURRICULUM AND THE DRIFT TO THE TECHNICAL

According to some, curriculum theory and practice stand in need of some new possibilities. Beyer and Apple (1998) suggest that there has been a shift in curriculum theory and practice away from consideration of what should be taught and why, to how to organize curriculum and evaluate it. Professional curriculum debate has come to be dominated by procedures rather than discussion of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Curriculum has moved from philosophy to technicality and, Beyer and Apple would argue, technique is winning out over substance. They call for a reintegration of the ethical, the personal and the political into curriculum discourse.

Also writing in the USA, William Pinar, in the introduction to a collection of essays on new identities for curriculum, speculates on the role of the 'curricularist' and the site of his/her work (Pinar, 1998). He says that the role of the curricularist – and it stretches from the academy to the classroom – has become uncertain in the face of what he calls 'the vacuum created by the collapse of the Tyler rationale' (xii). This latter approach to planning and organizing curriculum has dominated the field for the last fifty years. Ralph Tyler (1949) outlined a four-stage procedure for curriculum design. First, the educational objectives should be established. Second, the educational experiences necessary for achieving those objectives should be determined. Third, those experiences need to be summarized effectively. Finally, it must be determined whether the original objectives have been met. From Pinar's perspective, the curriculum field is now in need of a new paradigm. Posner (1998) also lays much of the blame for this theoretical vacuum on the dominance of the Tyler perspective in curriculum planning. He describes this as procedural, technical and non-ideological. Writing in the UK, Michael Young identifies similar difficulties. He calls for a new theory which can provide for the possibility of curriculum change – a theory which will transcend the dichotomy he identifies between curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice (Young, 1998). Young looks to the world outside the school for his inspiration.

Recent work undertaken by this author on the relationship between culture and curriculum notes that no one seems to have anything good or useful to say about curriculum any more (Looney, 2000). The curriculum has become something for teachers, students and schools to overcome, to manage, to conquer. There is little empowerment associated with it. This is clearly evidenced in the outcomes of a recent consultative process on the curriculum at lower secondary level. These consultations were undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as part of its ongoing curriculum review. The submissions, oral and written, point to this tendency to problematize the curriculum as 'overcrowded', or 'too long' or 'too much' (NCCA, 1998). Curriculum has become a problem rather than an opportunity.

Gleeson (1999), writing of the Irish curriculum context, summarizes the curriculum debate since 1986 as a series of oppositions between 'debates that happen very little' and 'debates that happen frequently'. His list is extensive, but a number of examples will illustrate how the pursuit of the technical over the theoretical has 'infected' curriculum discourse in Ireland. Education for democracy, he suggests, is rarely debated, but issues of power and control are widely discussed. The management of change wins out over the meaning of change, the relationship between education and economic growth and development over the relationship between education and the common good. According to Gleeson,

the domination of the rational technical paradigm has allowed frag- mentation and discontinuity to go unchallenged, while macro cur- riculum issues are neglected. (2000: 26)

The OECD examiners, writing in 1991, support Gleeson's criticism. They concluded that:

The basic goals and values of the education system have tended to be tacit rather than explicit during a period when major transformation in the society, economy and culture have been occurring: curriculum, assessment and examination changes have been continual but piecemeal. (OECD, 1991: 76)

Thus Murray (1995), for example, writing about the 'delivery' of curriculum change discusses five significant elements in the curriculum change process: 'time, carefully planned implementation strategies, firm commitment from all the partners, the changing needs of students and necessary and appropriate consultation' (55). It is noteworthy that at the time of writing, Pat Murray was vice-chairperson of the National Council for Curriculum and Assess- ment, the body which formulates curriculum and assessment policy and advises the Department of Education and Science accordingly.

Of course, these symptoms of technical rationality are not confined to cur- riculum. They are found across the breadth of educational studies and have reached epidemic proportions in the discourse of educational reform. Ozga (1990) identified an emerging preoccupation with gathering 'rich descriptions' while keeping well away from agendas which focus on, for example, theoriz- ing the role of the state in education. Such rich descriptions are gathered, she suggests, 'without sufficient thought to the nature of the thing to be described' (30). Ranson (1995) summarizes this as symptomatic of a broad shift from a political order based on principles of social democracy to one based on prin- ciples of what he terms neo-liberal consumer democracy. In this new order public goods are seen as aggregated private choices. In such a context, 'efficient' and 'effective' curriculum becomes more important than 'good' or 'valuable' curriculum. And 'efficient' and 'effective' policies become more

important than 'good' and 'valuable' policies. Curriculum studies and policy studies share the same symptoms.

Ball (1997) claims that educational policy studies have suffered from particularly acute 'theoretical isolationism'. This isolation is on a number of fronts. First, it has suffered from an empirical isolationism – a failure to place education in a broader social policy context. Second, it has suffered from an interpretative isolationism – failure to look beyond itself to theories and concepts from other fields (with the exception, suggests Ball, of an uncritical embrace of quasi-market concepts). The third frontier of isolation arises from the first:

> education policy researchers close down the possibility for interpretation and rip the actors who feature in the dramas of education out of their social totality and their multiple struggles. (1997: 269)

A consequence of this theoretical isolationism, argues Ball, is that it leads to a tendency to overestimate the effects of education on social inequality. Ball (1990: 7) summarizes the situation well:

> The changing processes of policy-making in education over the past ten years have, to a great extent, outrun the development of relevant analysis and conceptualization.

The curriculum and policy fields are both suffering from similar symptoms of theoretical isolationism. Curriculum and policy are more likely to be dissected than interrogated, leading to a scenario for both which Ozga (1990) envisages where all that is achieved is that the machine of policy is dismantled, the parts labelled but no explanation is offered as to how it works or what it is for.

Finding new perspectives on curriculum which could lead to the development of new theories and restore a more philosophical approach has become an urgent task. It is not curriculum alone which is suffering as a consequence. According to Fullan (1993), it is the silence about curriculum that is at the root of much failed reform. It appears from the policy literature that work under way on addressing the theory deficit there may offer some possibilities for similar work in the curriculum field. Ball (1994) himself suggested the potential of a more theoretical approach for the four message systems of education – curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and organization. He notes that only in this way can the restorationism evident in the development and installation of the National Curriculum in England and Wales and the model of 'curriculum as museum' be challenged! It can also be argued that the *intersection* of these four message systems has lacked discussion, analysis and the identification of implications.

Of course, to consider curriculum from a policy perspective is to accept that curriculum *is* policy and policy in its most public form. It is to accept

the ideological roots of curriculum – that it is culturally selected and rep-
resented, that it arises as a product of choice. Therefore it becomes, as Rogers
(1997) suggests, 'the hardest nut to crack' because changing the curriculum
'goes against the grain of collective cultural experiences and expectations'
(684).

## THE POTENTIAL OF POLICY – THE UNITARY PERSPECTIVE

What might developments in the field of policy studies have to offer the
pursuit of new theories and perspectives for curriculum? First, the insistence
by those in the field that the policy text be considered as part of the process
is a useful one. Bowe *et al*. (1992) challenge the view that policy is a linear
process made up of a stage of development and a stage of implementation.
Such a view is still held, as evidenced by Tyack and Cuban's (1995) delin-
eation of a three-phase educational reform process: a phase of policy talk, a
phase of policy action and a phase of policy implementation. This manageri-
alist perspective on the policy process is challenged by Taylor *et al*. (1997)
who suggest that 'policy involves the production of the text, the text itself,
ongoing modifications to the text and the processes of implementation into
practice' (25). Similarly, Ball (1994: 19) challenges the dichotomy between
policy as text and policy as discourse. Texts, he suggests, enter rather than
change existing circumstances:

> Policies don't normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances
> in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are nar-
> rowed or changed, or particular goals or options are set.

In this scenario, the idea of policy outcomes makes little sense. Instead, all
that can be identified are policy effects. These effects fall into two categories
– specific and general. According to Ball (1994), considerable attention is
given to the specific effects, but the general effects, the macro picture formed
by 'ensembles of policy', is rarely considered. Thus, as suggested earlier, the
four-message systems of education – curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and
organization – are treated in isolation, and the intersection between them is
subject to little analysis.

  Gleeson, in his overview of Irish curriculum policy over the last twenty-
five years, would concur. He cites Callan's view that debate and concern
have focused largely on the results of 'piecemeal adjustments or alignments'
while 'avoiding addressing fundamental curriculum issues'. While the late
1980s and the 1990s are associated with the phrase 'unprecedented curricu-
lum change' (and hence the current claim by post-primary teachers for a 30
per cent pay increase!), little has changed in the landscape of curriculum at

post-primary level. Lower secondary has been the particular focus of the change rhetoric. Subjects have been tweaked. Citizenship (civic, social and political education) and health education (social, personal and health education) have been introduced (leading to the 'overload' mentioned earlier), but much remains the same. The failure to achieve significant change, especially at lower secondary level, has generally been attributed to the lack of development of assessment – another of Ball's message systems of education. One of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's own papers suggests that the 'new' curriculum at lower secondary has never been experienced as it was intended because the associated assessment system was never introduced (NCCA, 1998). Instead, the secondary school landscape is dominated by two formal written examinations for certification. Thus while the expected outcome of a policy, and as Gleeson suggests, of a curriculum, are the focus of some comment, the impact of policy or curriculum on its social setting is ignored. This false dichotomy between the outcomes and the policy is overcome in the more unitary text/discourse process/product view suggested by Ball (1994) and Taylor *et al.* (1997).

Possibilities for curriculum arise. If curriculum is viewed in a similar unitary fashion – beyond the development/implementation divide – as text *and* discourse (Ball, 1994) or a product *and* process (Taylor *et al.*, 1997), then, in some sense, we may begin to address what Stenhouse (1975) identified as the fundamental curriculum problem: 'The central problem of curriculum study is the gap between our ideas and aspirations and our attempts to operationalize them' (25). Of course, adherents of the School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) movement argue that the dichotomy has been overcome (Skilbeck, 1976). However, the critique of Hargreaves (1989) that SBCD suffers from 'micropolitical naiveté' is surely upheld by the dominance of the technical over the theoretical in contemporary curriculum debate. However, in Ireland, it should be noted that, probably due to system size, SBCD has been quite successful in canvassing the national policy agenda. As Granville (1995: 152) argues:

> In the Irish context, it has been argued that the advent of the NCCA facilitated the dissemination of localized curriculum innovation within the national system. The NCCA acted to some extent as a conduit for the flow of ideas from the periphery to the centre while also providing a more structured national framework for the implementation of emerging curriculum and assessment policy.

However, while some unity is evident in the *sites* for curriculum development in Ireland, as Gleeson's overview shows, this geographical unity is not matched in curriculum debate and analysis – the process and the product, the text and the discourse remain largely separate. Granville argues that the failure to build on the relatively strong centre–periphery relationship in

Ireland has resulted in the failure to disseminate successful innovations. What is needed, he suggests, is a 'suitable mechanism to mediate this loose coupling' (1995: 156). I would challenge Granville's technicist solution. Unless some *theoretical* unity is achieved, curriculum development and discourse, product and process will remain fractured. A 'loosely coupled mechanism' may facilitate dissemination but unless it is theoretically underpinned it is easily sundered. Granville himself points to this weakness in his own analysis of the difficulties associated with consideration of the curriculum at upper secondary level where the stakes are much higher and the needs of the economy have shaped a much more centrally driven model of curriculum reform and development.

## FURTHER POTENTIAL – BEYOND PARTNERSHIP

Within this unitary view of policy – as process and product – there exist three quite different perspectives on how that process/product is constructed, and to what end. The first model – the pluralist model – sees the process/product driven by diversity. The process is influenced at every level by a wide variety of interests (Scott, 1996). According to Ranson (1995), the policy landscape in the post-war United Kingdom is generally subject to this pluralist analysis. The 'partnership' between teachers, the LEAs and the ministry in the tasks of planning curriculum and winning resources saw a distributed system of decision-making, according to Ransome. In the pluralist model, power is diffused between the partners. Taylor *et al*. (1997) take a less optimistic view of the pluralist model. They identify an elitist model masquerading as partnership where the policy – process and product – is designed to serve powerful interest groups.

There is a strong partnership rhetoric running through social and economic policy development in Ireland. This is particularly so in education where the phrase 'partners in education' is widely used to mean the teacher unions, school managers and parent representative groups. Two years prior to the publication of a White Paper on Education in 1995, a National Education Convention was established as a consultative process. The then Minister for Education described it in a perfect example of the education partnership rhetoric:

> The objective of this dialogue was to promote the articulation of the various viewpoints of the partners, to improve mutual understanding between sectoral interests and to identify areas of actual or potential agreement between the different groups. (Bhreathnach, 1996: 17)

This partnership rhetoric appears to be expressed in the curriculum policy structures. The Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was

established in 1984, representative of all the 'partners in education', and plans were under way in 2000 to establish its successor, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, on a statutory basis. (It is interesting to note that delays are expected in the setting up of the statutory body as negotiations get under way as to just which 'partners' should be included and how many representatives should they have on the Council and its subsidiary structures!)

However, Gleeson and Granville disagree on the extent to which the rhetoric is matched in the reality of curriculum policy. The latter takes a relatively optimistic view and sees the Interim CEB and the NCCA as attempts to give ownership of the process of curriculum change to teachers and school management. The former suggests that 'some partners are inevitably more powerful than others' (Gleeson, 2000: 20) and the relative powerlessness of parents when compared to the power of the teaching unions, for example, would indeed support the view of Taylor that partnership can hide the role of policy elites.

The second perspective on how policy is constructed, and the one which will be of particular interest for this article, is the model which sees the policy process as 'fractured, dislocated, only occasionally exhibiting a linear form' (Scott, 1996: 133). From this perspective, policy can never be described as authored – it is always an overlay. Furthermore, the policy may be altered in the implementation and 'transformations may come about as legislative texts are recontextualized' (Bowe *et al.*, 1992). They summarize:

> Policies will be interpreted differently as the histories, experiences, values, purposes and interests which make up any arena differ. The simple point is that policy writers cannot control their meanings. (1992: 22)

Thus the policy process is multilayered, each layer requiring its own analysis, and each analysis having to take account of the other layers in the process. The simplicity of the linear is replaced by the complexity of the cyclical. From this multilayered perspective, implementation is always interpretation; and it is always interpretation built on the effects of previous policies. Drawing on the work of Barthes, Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) distinguish between 'writerly' and 'readerly' texts, and classify policy texts as 'writerly' in that they must be contextualized by those who read, interpret and implement them. They identify three contexts of policy production – the context of influence, the context of text production and the context of practice (Figure 1). Together, these contexts constitute what Bowe *et al.* call the policy cycle – a heuristic model for understanding the policy process.

While this triarchic model may seem neatly constructed, the authors point out that the symbiosis between the different contexts is often an uneasy one. Conflicts can occur *within* contexts – between the public and private arena within the context of influence, for example. Actors in different sites of text production can be in competition for control of the representation of policy.
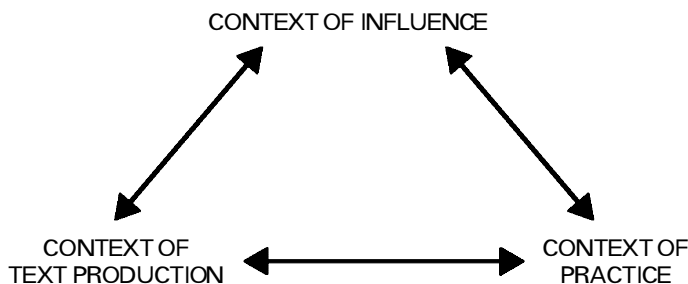
*Figure 1*  The policy cycle
*Source*:  Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992: 20.

In 1994, Ball added two further 'contexts' – the context of outcomes and the context of political strategy. As Taylor *et al*. (1997) note, 'It is important to recognize policy processes as inherently political in character and involving compromises, trade offs and settlement' (26).

Ball's policy cycle finds no home in the discourse of Irish curriculum policy – either from the 'policy expert' or the 'curriculum expert'. Writing on the creation of a climate for policy development, Cussen (1995), the former Assistant Secretary at the Department of Education and Science (DES), suggests that the department is playing its part in supporting 'effective policy development' in a number of ways. He sets out these innovations – in true managerialist style. First, the Department of Education and Science has put a Strategic Management Initiative in place. This, he promises, will result in greater clarity of aims and objectives and, consequently, greater effectiveness. Second, the DES has also taken steps to ensure 'effective communication of its position'. Third, the DES is encouraging open involvement with what he calls the 'educational environment' (note the strategic avoidance of the phrase 'partners in education' here). Finally, Cussen says that the DES is continuing to strengthen its policy formulation and policy evaluation procedures. He continues:

> The range of policy and implementation issues is now so diverse and complex that significantly enhanced capacity, both in terms of continuing development of people and systems, will be important for its future effectiveness. (1995: 48)

Not much room for a policy cycle in the process Cussen sets out here. In fact, this perspective would seem to support the neo-marxist critique of the policy cycle as being historically and politically naïve in not taking account of the relative power of those involved in the process (Ozga, 1990; Troyna, 1994). (This neo-marxist critique gives rise to the third perspective on the policy process – policy is always about the pursuit by central authority of power or capital. However, this perspective will not be pursued in this article.)

It might be expected that the policy cycle would find some resonances in the work of Gleeson, particularly in the light of the latter's reflections on the rhetoric and reality of 'partnership' in the policy process. However, Gleeson seems to envisage little agency beyond the powerful partners. He suggests that the presence of sectoral interests in the policy process leads to fragmentation and discontinuity in curriculum policy. He asserts that, in Ireland, curriculum is subject to 'pet curriculum projects' of government and of powerful lobby groups. He suggests that the only way in which this fragmentation might be overcome is if there were basic changes in the power structures in Irish society. As this is unlikely, Gleeson settles for regional education boards. It seems a drastic compromise.

It is the assertion of this article that a more theorized understanding of curriculum as policy might also be considered as a strategy, not simply as an aid to understanding curriculum but as a means to challenge this fragmentation and discontinuity.

## TOWARDS A THEORY OF CURRICULUM AS POLICY

Ball's policy cycle offers some possibilities as a theoretical framework for curriculum policy. The policy contexts in his map become curriculum contexts. The two background contexts are particularly significant. The curriculum cycle is always related to the full range of political strategies and takes place in the residue of previous curriculum policies and innovations (Figure 2).

Is this model any different from the policy cycle in its broader form? In the Irish context, the context of influence and text production differ from the
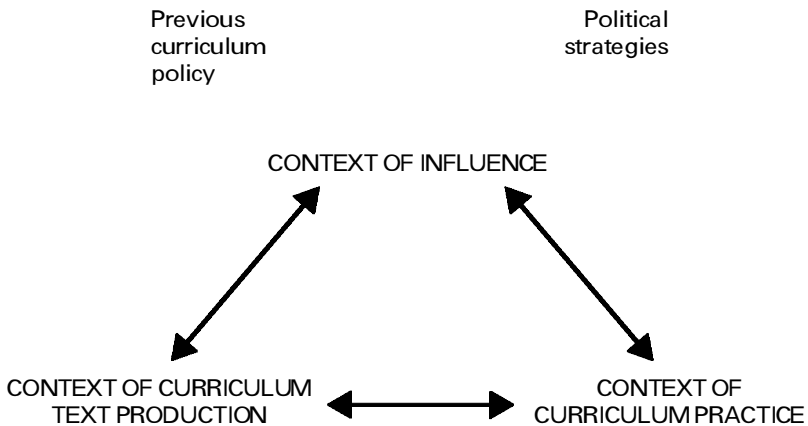


*Figure 2* The curriculum cycle

broader cycle because of the particular role of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. A further difference arises from the relatively small size of the Irish education system. The context of practice may be of greater significance in curriculum than in other policy areas – fiscal policy, for example, would be subject to the European Central Bank, thus greatly reducing the significance of, or space for, indigenous practice. This curriculum cycle does assume agency outside the context of influence. Granville's analysis of School Based Curriculum Development in Ireland has shown this to be the case. Curriculum development can, and is, initiated at school level, or among networks of schools, especially at post-primary level. However, whether the relationship between such initiatives and the context of influence is a consequence of the small scale of the Irish education system, or of a genuine commitment to support such agency, is debatable.

Just as Ball's policy cycle is open to a neo-marxist critique, so too is the theoretical framework proposed here. It is open to what Apple (1995: 17) calls his 'political questions'.

> Why and how are the particular aspects of a collective culture represented in schools as objective factual knowledge? How, concretely, may official knowledge represent the ideological configurations of the dominant interests in a society? How do schools legitimate these limited and partial standards of knowing as unquestioned truths?

The model may appear theoretically and politically naïve. Is it an analytical tool? Might it form the basis for an attempt at a theoretical retooling of the curriculum field? Or is it simply a useful descriptive device, enabling curriculum talk, but adding little to curriculum discourse? I would suggest that it can be both. The essential difference is not in the contexts themselves, but in the *relationships between them*. What is the nature of those relationships? A means–end rationality? Do the arrows denote the exchange of information? A differential power relationship? A feedback mechanism?

The policy cycle proposed by Ball has been subject to criticism by those who challenge his pluralist stance. As early as 1990, Gewirtz and Ozga highlighted what they called the 'uncritical acceptance of partnership and pluralist explanations of past policy making' (37). Hatcher and Troyna (1994) accuse Ball of accepting a simple choice between simplistic normative cause and effect policy-making and a multi-site pluralist policy context. They further question his distinction between readerly and writerly texts, suggesting that a concession to teacher professionalism in policy texts is not designed to encourage teacher autonomy and interpretation but to incorporate teachers into the project. If the curriculum policy cycle is to avoid similar criticism I would suggest a relationship between the contexts based on *critique*. Such a relationship would arise from ongoing critical dialogue within and between the various contexts. Thus the agency of the context of curriculum practice, for example, would reach beyond the 'readerly' response

to curriculum policy, beyond the cosiness of 'partnership' to a more critical agency which would seek to expose the ideological position of the context of influence. This dialogue would lead to the development, in each context, of what Posner (1998) calls a 'curriculum conscience'.

For Posner, it is this curriculum conscience that offers an alternative to the technical bias of the Tyler rationale. Curriculum conscience assumes that the 'objectively based means–end rationality is itself an ideological pretence' (1998: 95). This conscience is ever aware of its own ideological assumptions and of those underpinning the other contexts. It will expose the curriculum policy cycle as ideological rather than technical. For this author, professionally placed within the context of influence in Irish post-primary education, the development of a curriculum conscience is the beginning of reflexivity.

Proposing a relationship between the contexts of the curriculum policy cycle based on critique, and the development of a curriculum conscience, may offer an anchor against the drift to the technical and, perhaps, a resetting of the compass towards the theoretical.

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