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Agenda-setting for education reform: the case of the Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education

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ABSTRACT

Policy cycles are initiated via a variety of context-bound causal drivers. In situations where systemic reform is desired, agenda-setting is vital to this process. This paper examines 'The National Discussion on Scottish Education', which was a sequence of stakeholder engagements promoted as a listening exercise to enable policy agenda-setting for a period of education reform. By considering key elements of the context of education reform in Scotland, the design of the stakeholder engagement process, the published outcome of the process, and by reflecting on the purposes underpinning these, this paper examines the conceptual bases upon which the National Discussion and the Vision Statement that arose from it were founded. The intention to create a vision that was both consensual and compelling was challenging to realise in practice. However, the focus on communitarian values evinced through the Vision Statement offers a helpful orientation for future policymaking and professional practice in education, suggesting the important interrelationship between vision and values for agenda-setting in policy.



KEYWORDS

Agenda-setting; education policy; vision; values; reform; National Discussion; Scotland

Introduction

Education policy can be understood as a mechanism by which governments circumscribe the accumulation of human and social capital as a route to influencing both individual and collective economic prosperity and welfare within a society (Benos, 2010; Woessmann, 2016).

The tools, instruments or techniques of policy that enable governments to undertake the work of governing (Bali et al., 2021) are varied and often responsive to contextual demands (Capano & Lippi, 2017). One of these tools, agenda-setting (i.e. the articulation of priorities), is acknowledged as a necessary means of enabling stakeholder and organisational interests to shape policy engagement in democratic jurisdictions (Bali & Halpin, 2021). Agenda-setting is an example of a procedural policy tool that has the capacity to define the issues that focus government attention, as well as impacting the ways in which policy is formulated (Bali & Halpin, 2021; Bali et al., 2021). Agenda-setting is an example of

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a causal driver that can enable understanding of how policy cycles come into being and then evolve over time (Hellström & Jacob, 2017).

The focus of this paper is the education policy agenda-setting work undertaken in Scotland via a system-wide engagement with education stakeholders in 2022, labelled 'The National Discussion on Scottish Education', and the report that was published as a result of it (Campbell & Harris, 2023). By considering key elements of the context of education reform in Scotland, the design of the stakeholder engagement process, the published outcome of the process, and by reflecting on the purposes underpinning these, this paper aims to critically examine the conceptual bases upon which the National Discussion and the Vision Statement that arose from it were founded.

The context of reform

In Scotland, at the time of writing, a period of education reform is underway. A brief summary of the background to this and to the Scottish education system more broadly is offered here by way of contextualisation.

In Scotland, education provision is supplied, in the main, by state funding, which is devolved by the Scottish Government to 32 local authorities. Scotland's education system is separate from that in the rest of the United Kingdom, with its own curriculum and qualifications (Smith, 2018). Compulsory schooling is provided for primary and secondary pupils up to age 16, with nursery provision and post-compulsory provision also available.

After a period of piecemeal curriculum change through the late 20th century, a significant wholesale reform of the curriculum was implemented from 2010 which sought to provide a curriculum that would encompass the full educational experience of pupils from age 3 to 18 (Priestley & Humes, 2010). Entitled *A Curriculum for Excellence*, a simultaneous objective was to reduce the prescriptiveness of the curriculum and encourage greater professional autonomy to meet localised learning needs (Priestley & Humes, 2010). Since its inception, *A Curriculum for Excellence* has been subject to considerable scrutiny and critique (Humes, 2020).

In response to a commission from the Scottish Government, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) undertook an independent review of Scotland's national curriculum, *A Curriculum for Excellence*, marking 10 years since its inception. The OECD's (2021b) report on the review suggested that, while there are many positives associated with the curriculum, the growing volume of policy associated with it and the lack of support for implementation has created a fragmented picture in practice. This, the report noted, is compounded by the challenging context of teachers' work. The report suggested that these factors, amongst others, may be detrimental to the Scottish education system achieving desired outcomes for learners. One of the recommendations of the report was that Scotland should refresh the core elements of its vision in terms of their practical implications for teachers' work. Another was that the structure and functions of the executive agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education, Education Scotland, and the qualifications and awards body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, should be reviewed (OECD, 2021b). Implicit in the OECD report's recommendations was a view that the many working parts of the education system were rusty and in need of renovation to enable better articulation and system-level congruence.

The Scottish Government's response accepting the report's recommendations in principle outlined how it would take these forward and averred a commitment to:

... putting the voices of young people, parents, teachers and school leaders, as well as other stakeholders, at the centre of education policy development ... [ensuring] that impactful and representative engagement is integral to our implementation of the OECD's recommendations, and that that engagement demonstrably shapes how changes are made. Lived educational experience will inform and shape future policy development and decision making in Scottish education. (The Scottish Government, 2021b)

Consequently, the Scottish Government commissioned a further report, this time focused on structural and functional aspects of education reform in Scotland. This was compiled with reference to a range of perspectives via a panel of education experts and a practitioner and stakeholder advisory group (The Scottish Government, 2021a). The Muir Report, entitled *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education* (Muir, 2022) contained 21 recommendations, which triggered multiple consultations on a range of aspects of Scottish education. The first recommendation foregrounded the importance of the education system's accountability to learners:

The Scottish Government should initiate a national discussion on establishing a compelling and consensual vision for the future of Scottish education that takes account of the points made in this report, in particular the importance of placing the learner at the centre of all decisions. The vision for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) should be considered as part of this discussion as should consideration of how the education system seeks to address the purposes described in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). (Muir, 2022, p. 4)

In direct response to this recommendation, the Scottish Government established 'The National Discussion on Scottish Education', a 'listening exercise', co-convened with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) (The Scottish Government, 2023b). The National Discussion was facilitated by two members of the International Council of Education Advisers who were appointed by the Scottish Government in 2016 (The Scottish Government, n.d.b). The broad purpose of the National Discussion was to gather stakeholder views on Scottish education. Its more explicit purpose was to set out a 'compelling and consensual' vision for the future of Scotland's education system in line with the Muir Report's first recommendation (The Scottish Government, 2023b). Extensive engagement across a spread of stakeholder events, online meetings, school assemblies, surveys and social media fed into the National Discussion over a ten-week period late in 2022 (The Scottish Government, 2023b).

The report arising from the National Discussion, entitled *All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education Final Report* (Campbell & Harris, 2023), was intended to provide the basis for the vision.

Conceptual framing

Drawing on the conception of policy and its instruments as socially constructed and reflective of power differentials (Schneider & Ingram, 2005), the present policy analysis shares the stance that policymaking is 'an intellectual process of constituting a reality and then attempting to work within it' (Linder & Peters, 1998, p. 45). It uses Peters'

(2002) taxonomy of situational drivers for policy instrument choice: ideas, individuals, institutions, interests and international environment, as the underpinning principle for analysis and discussion of elements of cultural politics at work in the National Discussion process.

Starting with the core idea of making the vision for the future of Scottish education a consensual one, consideration is given to the principles of democratic policy engagement and how these were evidenced in the design of the National Discussion. Moving from there to the text of the report on the National Discussion, attention turns to the challenges of the process in terms of the individuals, institutions and interests that it was possible to represent through data-gathering and reporting of findings. The influence of the international environment is considered with reference to the role of the OECD in both the process and intentions of the National Discussion.

Although primarily a policy process analysis that seeks to understand the 'strategic behaviour' and 'negotiated knowledge' (Mayer et al., 2013, p. 52) at work within the policymaking domain, the discussion that follows also draws on aspects of argumentative policy analysis connected with 'the language game' (Mayer et al., 2013, p. 51) operating at a semiotic and rhetorical level within the policy text, since language-based analysis facilitates consideration of both 'substance and systems' (Lester et al., 2017, p. 2) of policy. This hybrid approach enables exploration of the relationship between the expressed intentions of the National Discussion on Scottish education and the policy artefact that arose from it.

Making policy consensual

The first point that interests us here relates to the core idea acting as a situational driver in the National Discussion's agenda-setting policy process; the extent to which the intention to generate a 'consensual' (Muir, 2022, p. 4) vision was realistic or possible, given the range of interests, the variety of perspectives, the structural barriers and the many voices that remained unheard through the process. As an idea, a vision for Scottish education that is based on representation and accord is an appealing one but one that is fraught with challenge.

In Scotland, there is a tradition of consultative policy engagement in relation to education (Cairney et al., 2016). Such consultation seeks to inform policy through the gathering of views, which are considered alongside evidence generated through relevant data. This is by no means a straightforward process; indeed it is recognised to be a site of contention where ultimate decision-making lies in the hands of the policymakers rather than participants in the process (Cairney, 2023). In seeking out the views of some stakeholders, it must be recognised that many other voices are not being heard. However, it has been posited that building consensus is 'in the [Scottish education] system's DNA' (OECD, 2015, p. 16), so ingrained is the desire to engage stakeholder participation.

Seeking the perspectives of a range of stakeholders and representative voices as a way of shaping policy has been argued to be a productive method of ensuring that centralised policymaking remains answerable to the people it impacts (Fischer, 2016). It is also seen as a valuable means of ensuring that policymaking engages with the ethics of legitimate democratic representation and human flourishing (Lees-Marshment et al., 2020). In this

sense, it can be regarded as a form of indicative engagement; necessarily partial but symbolically representative.

In the case of Scotland's National Discussion, there was an open invitation shared with the education system at large to participate, with a hybrid online and in-person launch event to provide a springboard for this. However, the events and opportunities offered for participation during the discussion period relied on self-selection and the assumed visibility and accessibility of these opportunities. Notably, there was no meaningful system-wide support for participation, for example no time was set aside, nationally, for teachers or practitioners in their workloads to enable them to engage. In spite of this, 'an estimated 38,000 people [were] reached by the National Discussion' (The Scottish Government, 2023b) though only a fraction of this number (5,600) provided feedback through survey and email responses (The Scottish Government, 2023b). The final report on the process provides a generalised list of participants, including; 'early years organisations, schools, other education organisations, community groups, third sector organisations, youth workers, parents' groups, education professional organisations, local authorities, and policy makers' (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 8) making it difficult to discern the full detail of whose interests were represented in the process and to what extent.

Policy development work that harnesses stakeholder engagement has been labelled as 'participatory-deliberative' (Bua & Escobar, 2018, p. 126) in recognition of its capacity for representational involvement and multi-perspectival reasoning. It is a process not only of giving voice to individual viewpoints but also for the development of mutual understanding. In the broadest sense, this variety of policy-making centres on the building of shared perspectives, through a communitarian ethos of discursive practice where emergent, shared knowledge and consensus-building are the goal (Stark et al., 2021). Participatory-deliberative processes are a useful method of garnering public support for policy directions (Parkinson, 2006). They can enable policy to retain a firm basis in relevant experience and practice, and, arguably, in this way establish public confidence and support (Wang & Wart, 2007).

Participatory engagement with a range of stakeholders and interested others is increasingly used to influence governance directions and policy development (Bua & Escobar, 2018; Smith, 2009). The OECD argues for the importance of stakeholder voice as a means to 'improve collective decision making' and through this to 'strengthen democracy' (OECD, 2021a, p. 5). It is offered as a compensatory measure to a rising distrust in authoritarian and centralised governance (Butzlaff & Messinger-Zimmer, 2020).

The OECD encourages the use of participatory-deliberative processes on the basis that they offer policymakers a number of positive outcomes, including a focus on the common good. However, there is recognition that the value of such processes is directly tied to the manner of their execution, in other words they need to be 'designed well' (OECD, 2021a, p. 8) since how these processes are conceived and undertaken is closely connected to their credibility and utility. There are several issues that come to light when considering the design of the National Discussion and its expressed intention to listen to the voices of the teaching profession and wider stakeholders in the education system as a means of shaping policy directions.

Designed for consensus?

In the foreword to *All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education Final Report*, it is stated that the views included are at times 'conflicting, controversial and perhaps uncomfortable for some to hear' (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 2), suggesting that the consensual vision anticipated through the process of the National Discussion had been problematic to realise in practice, in terms of the nature of the issues arising through the engagement process. Given the scope of the remit and the practical challenges of the task, this is unsurprising. Notwithstanding, the report contained a Vision Statement that aimed to capture the many individuals, institutions and other interested parties whose voices contributed to the National Discussion.

A declaration such as the Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education is opaque by nature, since it purports to synthesise a multitude of themes and perspectives. In a purely practical sense, this is a challenging enterprise and one that is necessarily destined to have limited success in terms of legitimising a 'compelling and consensual' outcome. The process of sifting through the range of perspectives to identify themes articulated through the National Discussion events and engagements was undertaken by an independent research company but the final Vision Statement was generated by the final report's authors reviewing the data 'over and over' (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 12) lending a personal touch to what could have had the appearance of a somewhat mechanistic process.

The credibility of the authors is also articulated through their commitment to 'reflect, authentically and clearly' (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 12) on what those who participated in the National Discussion had to say. The report's concern to share the values and intentions of the authors speaks to a desire to make the vision a compelling one because it testifies to 'real or assumed power' (Freeman & Maybin, 2011, p. 7) through authorial voice. The authorial expression of commitment suggests an intention to make the process meaningfully responsive to the efforts and perspectives of those who participated. However, the simultaneous articulation of the 'conflicting, controversial' and 'uncomfortable' (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 2) nature of the views presented through the process suggests the reality was a more dissonant and complex experience.

A central aspect of the design of the National Discussion that bears attention is the sequence of questions that guided each of the local and national events. Questions to stimulate discussion and the production of data were the basis of each form of stakeholder engagement during the National Discussion period and formed a structure for participation and feedback. Ten questions were provided, each of which appeared to offer scope for open, deliberative response. These were:

- (1) What kind of education will be needed by children and young people in Scotland in the future?
- (2) How do we make that a reality?
- (3) How can every child and young person's individual needs be supported and addressed in the future?
- (4) What is one thing that needs to stay and why?
- (5) What are the most important priorities for a future Scottish education system?

- (6) How can we ensure that everyone involved in education in Scotland has a say in future decisions and actions?
- (7) How can children and young people be cared for and supported in the future? (i.e. physical and mental wellbeing)
- (8) How can the right of every child and young person to have opportunities to develop their full potential be achieved in the future?
- (9) How can children and young people be helped to learn about our changing world, so they feel able to positively contribute?
- (10) Do you have any other comments that you would like to provide about a vision for the future of Scottish Education?

(The Scottish Government, 2023c)

The report states that these questions were generated in consultation with ‘more than a hundred organisations dedicated to supporting and representing children and young people, as well as education partners and parent stakeholder groups’ (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 8) suggesting a desire to build on the existing priorities within the education system and to begin the process from the outset with stakeholder engagement. However, none of these questions approach systemic issues to do with culture, leadership or governance issues (Humes, 2023) suggesting a problematic bias that may undermine trust in the process.

The questions that guided the National Discussion were broad and ostensibly open in their invitation to respondents to share their perspectives. However, it is notable that six of the questions were directed at specific themes aligned, presumably, with the various contributing organisations’ agendas. These were; meeting individual needs, stakeholder voice, care and support, the right of children to achieve their potential, and enabling children and young people to feel positive about their contribution to our changing world. These themes were couched in terms of open queries about how these various objectives can be achieved. Notably, each of these themes forms a substantive part of what came to be published in the vision statement, suggesting a certain circularity in the process.

In the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), these question themes correspond broadly with Articles 6 (life, survival and development), 12 (respect for the views of the child), 18 (parental responsibilities and state assistance) and 29 (the goals of education). This aligns with the Muir Report’s recommendation for closer linkages with the UNCRC (Muir, 2022). However, other influences on these ‘starting position’ assumptions are also discernible. For example, the Morgan Review into Support for Learning provision in Scotland in 2020 included a recommendation for ‘[v]isible leadership to drive momentum for change and to maintain the visibility of children and young people who have additional support needs in public life’ (Morgan, 2020, p. 68). This was identified as a crucial requirement for system-level improvement. Arguably, the National Discussion, through its choice of questions, provides one form of high-profile visibility.

This building on prior or existing ideas and agendas highlights that policy work is inherently cultural and ‘economizes action by relieving people of the impossible task of interpreting afresh every situation before acting’ (Hoppe, 2002, p. 306). However, while it may provide a reassuring sense of not taking the National Discussion back to cover old

ground, it does, perhaps, beg the question of what other queries might have been formulated, to better ensure all stakeholders' needs and interests had an opportunity to be articulated through the process. The organisations and institutional interests that helped to shape the engagement questions make it problematic to see precisely whose interests are represented through the questions and whose are not.

Narrowing the field of vision

As noted above, the outcome of the final report into the National Discussion is what the authors term the 'Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education' (Campbell & Harris, 2023). This statement coalesces the complexity of the messages and themes that were gathered through the 'listening exercise' (The Scottish Government, 2023b) and distils them into four key areas, described in future-oriented statements about what is desirable for the education system and the children and young people who experience it. How we may evaluate such an outcome bears consideration.

The language that encapsulates policy is simultaneously descriptive and constructive of its concepts, which makes it a crucial means of unveiling the biases and power relations that are inherent in it (Fairclough, 2013). While the language of policy gives meaning to the practices that are influenced by it (Lynggaard, 2019), at the same time the language is given its meaning by the understandings and choices of those who use it to enact policy (Cino Pagliarello, 2022). This fluidity of interpretation can be regarded as a benefit in policy language, since it allows for adaptable variation to meet the requirements of different contexts and in this way creates opportunities for coalition (Béland & Cox, 2016) and a starting point for consensus-building. Taking this perspective, the four pillars of the Vision Statement may be seen as groundwork for future coalitions.

However, there is also a perspective that even in a situation where policy language sets out what appear to be collectively desirable aims, rather than opening the possibility of interpretation or translation, they can have the opposite effect. They can create a locus for 'de-contesting concepts [by] narrowing the semantic space' (Radaelli, 2023, p. 1862) within which meaning can be negotiated. This takes place through a process of simplification and summary and by investing heightened significance in particular concepts and the words that articulate them. By removing ancillary ideas and cutting through linguistic complexity to specify particular focal points, the play of possible meanings becomes constricted. Arguably, the Vision Statement, as it is presented in the final report on the National Discussion, is performing one such act of narrowing, by drawing together myriad viewpoints and previous review and policy messages, coalescing them into four objectives that are difficult to contest but also difficult to quantify.

Quantification of policy objectives is often linked with accountability measures and, in turn, it is recognised that accountability measures are closely linked with performativity, which is seldom in the best interests of thoughtful, agentic policy enactment (Priestley et al., 2014; Sinnema et al., 2020). This may explain the absence of tangible directives to address the array of concerns and situations shared throughout *All Learners in Scotland Matter* (Campbell & Harris, 2023). Rather, what the Vision Statement presents us with, appropriately enough, is a series of desirable outcomes for education. These, particularly in the context of the voices and situations represented through the report, may offer an insight into what are being presented as the deficiencies of the system. Analysis of the

conceptual principles on which policy artefacts are based can enable exploration of the thinking that underpins them in order to foreground the ways in which governance is actualised (Bacchi, 2009, 2012). That is to say, if we look at what the Vision Statement represents as desirable outcomes, we can also discern by inference what is highlighted as not currently being achieved and possible reasons for this.

In order to facilitate closer analysis, The Vision Statement is noted in full here:

Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education: All Learners in Scotland Matter

Children and young people are at the heart of education in Scotland. The Scottish education system values collaborative partnerships that engage all learners, the people who work within and with the education system, parents, and carers to ensure that all learners in Scotland matter.

All learners are supported in inclusive learning environments which are safe, welcoming, caring, and proactively address any barriers to learning and inequities that exist or arise. Education in Scotland nurtures the unique talents of all learners ensuring their achievement, progress, and well-being.

Each child and young person in Scotland has high-quality learning experiences which respect their rights and represents the diversity of who they are and the communities they live in.

Each child and young person experiences great teaching, resources, and support for joyful learning that builds their confidence and equips them to be successful and to contribute in their life, work, and world, so they know how much they matter.

(Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 15).

The desire to have ‘inclusive learning’, ‘high-quality learning’ and ‘joyful learning’, making effective use of ‘collaborative partnerships’ to support this in the best interests of learners and their communities are by no means innovative ideas in Scottish education. Indeed, *A Curriculum for Excellence* has been positioning these ideas as priorities since its inception (The Scottish Executive, 2006) and a range of critiques of enactment have happened in the interim (see for example: Arnott & Ozga, 2016; Hedge & MacKenzie, 2016; Priestley & Humes, 2010; Reeves, 2008; Riddell, 2009).

In this sense, then, nothing new in terms of learning about educational experiences is presented through the Vision Statement. Instead, what is highlighted is a sequence of outcomes that are yet to be realised. The problems of the education system are that children and young people are *not* at the heart of education in Scotland, that *not* all learners are supported in inclusive learning environments, that *not* every child has high-quality learning experiences and that *not* every child experiences great teaching. At base, three out of four of these are teaching quality issues. Seen in this way, the Vision Statement begins to read as if the problems of education in Scotland lie with teachers and perhaps with teacher education institutions by implication. The Vision Statement does nothing direct to call for amelioration of the funding issues that are gnawing at school budgets, to draw attention to the psychological and workload issues that inform teacher retention problems or to recognise the wider cultural, socio-economic or community issues that impact on what happens in schools and classrooms. While the Morgan Report (2020) recognised ‘the negative impact of increased need and static or reduced resources’ and a frontline context that is at times ‘stressful’ and ‘demoralising’ (p. 63), it also highlighted reliance on the ‘determined advocacy’ (p. 66) of an engaged minority of

stakeholder groups and identified this as one of a number of inequitable outcomes of the status quo. Implied was the need for all stakeholders at all tiers of the system to take a share of the responsibility and for every individual to recognise their own role in meeting every learner's needs. The Vision Statement arising from the National Discussion neither articulates nor implies any such shared responsibility, although there is acknowledgement of these and other issues in the wider narrative of the report (Campbell & Harris, 2023).

So what should we regard as the Vision Statement's purpose? Given the scale of the endeavour, what has the National Discussion brought to the education reform table? One possible answer may lie in the international policy environment, through the OECD's observation that policy for education in Scotland in recent years has circulated around the intention that teachers should become initiators and developers of change through their role as curriculum makers. This diverges from the traditional form of education policy intent, where teachers are consigned the role of implementers of policy mandates and become, through this, the means by which policies fail or succeed (OECD, 2021b). Scotland's innovative approach is recognised internationally in terms of the empowerment of teachers it espouses through *A Curriculum for Excellence* but the requirements of making a shift in perspective such as this a reality cannot lie exclusively with teachers. Rather, it requires coherence at all levels of the system so that the messages and demands across all areas converge rather than compete for attention (Gouédard et al., 2020; Sinnema et al., 2020). A holistic and harmonious picture of the policies guiding the education system is needed to build the kind of convergence that can make the aspirations of the system achievable. The four pillars of the Vision Statement may be regarded as creating a narrow and, therefore, practicable gateway to a policy environment that has consistency at its centre. In this sense, it is arguable that the Vision Statement is performing an essential task for realising the OECD's recommendations. It is a crucial first step for bringing about the system-level coherence that is currently lacking and perceived to be undermining Scotland's educational objectives (OECD, 2021b).

The text of *All Learners in Scotland Matter* (Campbell & Harris, 2023) does not explicitly say that this is its intent. However, it does offer some indications that its objectives had been strategic from the outset. After all, the purpose of a vision is to stimulate motivation and action (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). The authors suggest the Vision Statement's purpose is to 'renew', 'recraft and re-establish' the values of the system and to 'balance the realism of what is needed now with an inspiring optimism for education in Scotland' (Campbell & Harris, 2023, p. 16). In other words, insight into education experiences was neither expected nor desired as an outcome of the process. Seen from this perspective, the National Discussion was, rather, a route to reconstituting and tidying up the what the OECD suggested was a messy education policy landscape (OECD, 2021b). Its purpose was less conceptual than organisational novelty.

Policy evolution through complexity

Policy is social in nature, not only in the sense that it comprises documents or artefacts that direct decision-making but also through how these are received, translated and enacted in various contexts, cultures and value systems (Maguire et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2013). The multiplicity of interpretations of any given policy document makes

policy, as discussed above, necessarily polysemic (Cino Pagliarello, 2022). It succeeds in practice by virtue of how it is understood and is, in this way, self-germinating. Its language must therefore be accessible to interpretation or to decoding and recoding through the lens of the individual's experience and context (Ball et al., 2011). As a metaphor, these lines of argument begin to present a picture of policymaking and enactment as sites of heterogeneity and proliferation.

To extend the analogy further, policy can be seen to exist as an evolutionary process that is inherently cumulative and dynamic, drawing on variation, selection and replication to enable continuity in the social domain (Schubert, 2014). It can only develop meaningfully in environments that are conducive to its sustenance and safeguarding. In other words, its actualisation is dependent on an ecology that is supportive of its continued life. In the complex, overburdened policy context of Scottish education, the sheer diversity of policy competing for attention and resource has depleted its quality and efficiency. This is one way of understanding the OECD's (2021b) critique of the Scottish education context. It also enables a view of the Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education as a form of evolutionary selection intended to specialise the genetic constitution of education policymaking in Scotland.

The OECD's view of the Scottish education policy landscape may be informed by wider policy research agendas. It has been argued that a number of challenges attend policy proliferation in terms of how impact can be meaningfully realised and analysed. These include the challenge of conceptual fragmentation, lack of analysis of the interrelations between policies and their cumulative impact, and lack of systematic analysis of the causes underpinning policy development (Trein et al., 2021). Improved conceptualisation, co-ordination and integration of policies is a useful route to enabling connected problem-solving and synergy across the various domains of education policymaking.

Recognising the value of shared principles for policy co-ordination, The Vision for the Future of Scottish Education (Campbell & Harris, 2023) might be regarded as a consciously narrow guidewire for scenario-building for future policy development. Scenario-building is a method for both enabling risk avoidance and enhancing policy performance, as well as providing opportunities for creative engagement and building consensus (Pérez-Soba & Maas, 2015). Where there is complexity and uncertainty, scenario-building can offer a means of exploring and projecting possible outcomes. What the Vision Statement offers for future scenario-building is an orientation to the values that should underpin not only policy development but also policy enactment. In a messy policy environment, such orientation can light a pathway through value uncertainty, which can be a cause of policy failure.

Möller argues there are four types of value-related uncertainty in terms of policy engagement and interpretation. These are:

... uncertainty about *which* values we endorse, uncertainty about the specific *content* of the values we do endorse, uncertainty about *which* among our values *apply* to the problem at hand, and *the relative weight* among different values we do endorse. (Möller, 2016, p. 106) (original author's emphasis)

This is to say, while values may be well understood and even shared across and between actors within a policy context, the decision-making involved in how to rank and utilise them in particular situations can be a source of inertia. Some values are subjective

(personal), some intersubjective within a culture (for example teachers' professional values), while others may be regarded as objective and universal (Möller, 2016). This tripartite definition presents one level of challenge to individuals' decision-making by raising the question of priority. Another comes from the expectation of engagement with multiple policy artefacts which present conflicting demands, for example through partial or selective framing of problems (Grüne-Yanoff, 2016). Given the status of values as historically and culturally variable (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), value uncertainty provides a key reason for policy failing to hit its intended mark. What effective policymaking can do is enable a rationalisation and simplification of priorities, where this is required. Well-made policy has the capacity for 'transformative impact' (Ritchie, 2021, p. 225) and should encourage dynamism rather than fostering stasis. This may be the strategic intention the Vision Statement resulting from the National Discussion on Scottish Education has at its heart.

Implications

The development of the Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education (Campbell & Harris, 2023), when seen within the context of education reform and as a temporal policy chain linking to future policymaking, offers a curious blend of participatory process and strategic purpose. Arguably, the National Discussion was a vehicle for engagement designed to enable stakeholders to see their role in the policy process. It has been noted that, when policy actors understand their place in the process, better outcomes are achieved (Ritchie, 2021). Policymakers, in an age of pervasive media, are also concerned with the presentation of policy; how it is communicated to the people it affects and how it is represented in the public eye (Gillies, 2008). The National Discussion offered a high-profile opportunity for the gathering of views, to meet the Scottish Government's declaration that '[l]ived educational experience will inform and shape future policy development' (The Scottish Government, 2021b). However, as analysis here has shown, the report on the outcomes of the National Discussion could not realistically encompass all the many perspectives and experiences shared during the stakeholder engagement phase to generate a vision that was genuinely consensual. Seen in this way, the National Discussion may have been, to some degree, a public relations exercise.

On a more positive note, where this agenda-setting work has, arguably, succeeded is in the matter of making the vision compelling. In the production of the Vision Statement, the need to set an agenda for reform and the future policymaking associated with it is clear. By focusing on desirable outcomes for education, drawing on communitarian values such as social justice and inclusion, as well as teacher quality and professionalism, the Vision Statement pulls together a sequence of ethical imperatives that have the potential not only to improve the connectedness and coherence of policymaking in Scottish education but also to enhance teaching professionals' understanding of the priority of maintaining a values-driven orientation towards their role and, through this, enhancing learners' day-to-day experiences. It seems unlikely this was the outcome consultees anticipated.

It must be noted that there has been minimal evidence of the direct impact of the Vision Statement as agenda-setting for policy production and action to date. While 'strategic and delivery boards' (The Scottish Government, n.d.a) have been set up in response to the Muir Report (2022), the Vision Statement's impact on the function of

these is not yet clear. Since the publication of the final report into the National Discussion, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has put policy action in relation to education reform on hold, citing an intent to ‘chair a ministerial group which will advise on the totality of Education and Skills reform’ (The Scottish Government, 2023a). This raises the question of whether the agenda-setting dimension of the National Conversation can legitimately be seen as an example of a causal driver that enables understanding of how policy cycles come into being (Hellström & Jacob, 2017) or whether it is, rather, the public-facing dimension of a wider, less visible governance agenda.

Ongoing attention to the progress of education reform in the coming years and how this articulates with the Vision Statement will be a valuable focus for analysis to understand if this potential is realised in the longer term. Comparative studies of other jurisdictions and contexts would also enrich the evidence base for better understanding the relationship between agenda-setting and ensuing policy cycles.

The significance of this discussion lies in its contribution to cross-sectoral and international theories of policy instrument and process analysis, through examination of the case of the Scottish Government’s agenda-setting process for education reform. Investigating elements of the National Discussion’s design has enabled original and productive critique of this example of public engagement for policy agenda-setting. It has also highlighted aspects of the policymaking process that shape and are shaped by evolutionary principles, in terms of selection and specialisation, contributing to theoretical conceptualisations for managing policy and practice environments.

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