



# The activation of epistemological resources in epistemic communities: District educators' professional learning as policy enactment

Ian Hardy <sup>a,\*</sup>, Wayne Melville <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Education, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Education, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Policy enactment can be understood as a form of professional/teacher learning.
- District educators' professional learning is important for enacting policy reform.
- District educators draw upon various 'epistemological resources' to make sense of reform.
- But these resources are always enacted within particular 'epistemological communities'.
- District educators' experiences of these communities are essential for fostering teacher learning.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 4 August 2017

Received in revised form

22 December 2017

Accepted 28 December 2017

Available online 8 January 2018

### Keywords:

Epistemic communities

Epistemological resources

Policy enactment

Professional learning

Teacher learning

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that professional learning can be understood as a form of policy enactment, characterized by the activation of particular 'epistemological' resources within specific communities of shared understanding ('epistemic communities'). In making this case, we draw upon insights from district officials responsible for enacting a provincial assessment policy in Ontario, Canada. Our research suggests these senior educators' learning about assessment reform, particularly their strong advocacy for teacher learning for assessment reform, were epistemological resources developed within the specific, effective epistemic communities of which they had been a part, over time. Policy enactment is heavily influenced by student-centered school/cross-school/system communities.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

This article reveals how a group of district-level educators from a provincial city in Ontario, Canada, enacted the Ontario Ministry of Education assessment, reporting and evaluation policy, *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools*, particularly its call for greater attention to assessment *for* and *as* learning rather than simply *of* learning, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The research argues that not enough attention is given to how educators' learning informs policy enactment, and that the learning of these educators involved drawing upon these educators' particular forms of knowledge and abilities –

'epistemological resources' – in the context of the individuals and groups with whom they worked, or had worked previously – 'epistemic communities'. The research questions were: How did a group of district-level educators learn to enact the *Growing Success* policy's emphasis upon assessment *for* and *as* learning, rather than simply assessment *of* learning? How did the specific epistemological resources these educators brought with them, informed by the particular epistemic communities in which they worked, influence the enactment of the policy?

We focus upon district-level educators because even though it is two decades since Spillane (1996) argued that 'districts matter', and that district-level personnel 'do not figure prominently in contemporary school reform efforts' (p. 63), then, as now, there is a continued focus upon state/provincial reforms, and how these are enacted at the school level, but with less attention upon the work of those in districts. Indeed, in some jurisdictions, most notably England, national policies have sought to circumvent the role of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [i.hardy@uq.edu.au](mailto:i.hardy@uq.edu.au) (I. Hardy), [wmelvill@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:wmelvill@lakeheadu.ca) (W. Melville).

districts. However, in Scandinavian and North American contexts, districts continue to operate as important intermediaries between broader national and provincial policies, and the work and learning of those in schools. Some earlier, more prominent literature in this area has focused attention upon the cognitive aspects of the learning of district-level personnel and the misalignment with national and state policies, leading to problematic practices e.g. in relation to science standards (Spillane & Callahan, 2000), mathematics (Spillane, 2000) and state standard based reforms in the United States more broadly (Spillane, 1999). These cognitive aspects have included highlighting district level personnel's understandings of reform as the product of the interplay between beliefs about the reforms, the circumstances in which they come to understand the reforms, and the specific sources of information about the reforms to which they pay closest attention (Spillane, 1997). There has also been less attention upon the specific communities that have contributed to the development of this locally contextualized learning. Further, there has been less of a focus in the literature upon district-level personnel with a strong sense of policy reform, and how they seek to cultivate teacher learning for enhanced practice. Spillane and Thompson (1997) outline what they describe as three interrelated dimensions of local education agencies' capacity to support ambitious and robust teaching practice, which they describe as human capital, social capital and financial resources. Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet and Yoon's (2001) national statistical analyses of district mechanisms that support teacher professional development revealed strategies that sought to align professional development to standards and assessment; they also revealed a focus on ongoing improvement, and that engagement of teachers in planning learning activities were associated with more productive professional development provision. Scandinavian scholars have also flagged how the broader conditions within which senior personnel in districts work exert influence (Nihlfors, Johansson, Moos, Paulsen, & Risku, 2013). These scholars refer to the work that occurs within districts as an important intermediary of influences from transnational, national and regional levels to schools; however, these scholars tend to focus on the nature of superintendents' work more broadly, and the influence of broader governance structures, rather than in terms of how educators seek to cultivate conditions for teacher learning. In this article, we seek to elaborate how a provincial assessment policy was enacted, drawing upon the experiences of three senior district personnel responsible for facilitating teacher learning in one school district in regional Ontario.

The article is in five sections. The first section elaborates the concepts of epistemological resources and epistemic communities, and how these pertain to educational policy enactment as learning. The second section provides an overview of the policy contexts of our work, while the third section presents the methods and methodology informing the research. The fourth section presents an analysis of the data, and the final section discusses the research and implications.

## 2. Policy enactment as professional learning: the value of epistemological resources and epistemic communities

Coburn and Stein (2006) argue that, increasingly, the 'problem' of policy implementation has come to be seen as an issue of teacher learning. However, understandings of such learning are not straightforward. Previous research has revealed district officials as having multiple understandings about how teachers learn and change their practice; this includes more behaviorist, situated and cognitivist perspectives, but with a strong bias towards more behaviorist approaches (Spillane, 2002). Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) argue that context is important, and that policy enactment

'involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualization – that is, the translation of texts into action, and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices' (p. 3). Drawing upon Rizvi and Kemmis's (1987) earlier work, Ball et al. (2012) describe this process as involving 'interpretations of interpretations' (p. 3), acknowledging that the level of freedom to engage in such interpretation is influenced by the particular power relations and constraints in the contexts within which such work is set. While agreeing with Ball et al.'s (2012) focus on context, we also argue it is necessary to elaborate more explicitly the knowledges and understandings – epistemological resources – educators bring to bear in these contexts. In conceptualizing policy enactment, therefore, we take the position that such enactment is a multifaceted process of 'sense-making' (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), involving educators framing and contextualizing their understandings of policy. In this sense, professional learning is a form of policy enactment that takes into account the particular conditions that characterize educational settings, and the epistemological resources educators bring to those settings. At the same time, these knowledges and understandings and contexts are heavily influenced by the communities within which educators engage, and come to share particular understandings about the world – 'epistemic communities'. To help make sense of the multiplicity and variability of educators' learnings as enactment of policy, therefore, we draw upon the notion of 'epistemological resources' within 'epistemic communities', elaborated below.

Theorizing the activation of epistemological resources within an epistemic community is a novel approach to understanding relations between professional learning and policy enactment. The epistemological resources aspect constitutes such learning as informed by more cognitivist approaches (Hammer, Elby, Scherr, & Redish, 2005), through their attention to human sense-making (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Sense-making, in this context, can be understood as a distributed process in which people, materials and practices are all active in making meaning (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). This activity relies on educators interpreting the policy through their 'rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs, and attitudes ... and attempt[ing] to connect understanding with practice' (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 391). Hammer et al. (2005) argue that within what they describe as 'a resources-based framework,' it is important to 'view learning an idea ... as a cognitive state the learner enters or forms at the moment, involving the activation of multiple resources' (p. 93). It is this notion of 'activation' that is important, and Hammer et al. (2005) argue that 'transfer' of knowledge can then occur in different contexts as actors draw again upon this cognitive state. The activation becomes enabled through the epistemological resources generated through previous experience. Flagging epistemological resources as responsible for the activation of learning is important for going beyond generalized claims about educators simply drawing upon their previous experiences to inform their work in new settings.

Hammer and Elby (2000) argue these epistemological resources are not unitary but are fragmented, and different combinations are activated in different contexts. The points at which actors are no longer able to activate knowledge, abilities, and understanding in a manner that enables them to make sense of a policy represents the boundary of their epistemological resources in relation to that policy, at that particular time. The result is that understandings become 'framed' by prior expectations and these become available as resources for new experiences and circumstances. The activation of epistemological resources (and the resultant frames) can be transitory and unstable; alternatively, activation can be considered 'locally coherent' when the resources reinforce each other and/or are reinforced by the context (Hammer et al., 2005). Expert learners

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6850066>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6850066>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)