

## **Decoding Policy**

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In bureaucratic circles, “policy” is perhaps the word used with most frequency, apart from “budget,” of course. Those in legitimate positions of power are the ones responsible for formulating policy for others to implement.

Like in other Ministries, officers charged with the responsibility of implementing policies in education appear hard-pressed to translate into reality that which has not been stated or declared. Recently, students on the postgraduate Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) programme at The University of the West Indies (UWI) were required to use reflection and analysis to critique various policies within their own schools. A sampling of these academic papers shows that many practising teachers claim that for some areas of school organisation there is no written policy. Most of what they have to be guided by is either assumed through innuendo, administrative repetition, or personal interpretation. Some feel that there is the need for clearer policies to guide their decision-making in the school setting.

Many eminent researchers have studied the issue of the challenges of researching policy, but perhaps one of the most interesting elements of policy is its transformation into praxis. What happens once “policy” is handed down? Who explains the policy, who implements it, and what’s lost in translation?

Macro policy normally feeds into how school administrators and teachers function at the micro level. Yet no macro policy can spell out the appropriate action to be taken in every situation. Let us consider a few policy challenges that have come into the foreground in recent times. What is the Ministry’s policy with regard to religious observations in schools? How are pregnant teens to be dealt with? How do we deal with teens who commit violent crimes? While it is to be expected that schools would have varying policies on mundane matters, it is not clear whether all schools have standard policies on broader issues such as teacher absenteeism, performance management, teacher and administrative accountability, student performance, and special needs, among a host of others.

Schools cannot look to macro policy to direct their decision-making in every sphere of educational activity, especially when we consider the nature of the hidden or silent curriculum. Although the macro policy of the Ministry of Education may be driven by a specific and stated overarching philosophy, it is incumbent upon educators in the field to read between the lines, to interpret, and to align their behaviours with the system’s intentions.

At the micro level we see that modern demands for “strategic planning” have forced school administrations to create mission statements pertinent to individual schools. Much time is spent creating these statements that are not always reflected in the spirit or in the nature of the organisation. Young teachers do not always understand these statements and

do not necessarily know how to characterise their practice with the essence that propelled them in the first place.

As a beginning teacher, I was assigned a mentor who was an experienced teacher in the particular school. But what I found was that every teacher who was there before me behaved like a mentor, guiding and monitoring. What was interesting for me was that in a school that held school culture close, small details seemed to matter a lot. In hindsight now, I know that it is the small things that are the translation of the broader message. So that making sure you had an umbrella as a standard requirement ensured that you had every intention of getting to class on time. Using the stipulated ink for report books meant that you regarded that document as official correspondence from the school to the parent. If a teacher was late in handing in an exam mark for a class other than his/her own, the policy was that that teacher would complete the reports of that class as a lesson in responsibility and consideration. No one questioned it then.

School administrators will do well to spend time engaging teachers in determining what they, as members of a single school community, have in common in terms of a philosophy of education. They may be surprised to find that the lofty philosophy that informed the macro policies at the higher levels of governance may indeed share some commonalities with the individual philosophies that inform the policies at the micro level of the school and the classroom.

School principals must ensure that teachers arrive at clear understandings of macro and micro policy, and that well-enunciated guidelines are set out for the types of teacher behaviours that will bring about the types of institutions that they are striving to build, and, consequently, the types of individuals they hope to mould for the future. In the school situation, policy needs definition, declaration, and demystifying.

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