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Social Work and policy practice: group reflection and policy inquiry

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1 Introduction

Social Work and policy practice are inextricable — and engaging with policy is a central element of social work education. However, the nature of the relationship of social work and policy practice has changed and shifted over time in various ways, depending on the focus of social work and the attitude of policy-makers (Evans and Keating 2015). At times, social workers, such as the pioneers of the welfare state, have worked to extend the nature and scope of public responsibility for welfare services. Following the establishment of the post-war welfare state, professionals such as social workers were central to realising policy in action and developing new services from the ground up in recognition of growing or unmet social need. With the pivot to neoliberalism in the 1980s, policy-makers became antagonistic to overt professional policy practice, although they relied on professionals making policy work on the ground to deliver services. But more recently, neoliberalism has shifted the emphasis from control and direction to a more entrepreneurial phase, encouraging service development amongst front-line staff to bridge the gap between inadequate resources and service delivery (Evans 2018).

While social policy is a central plank of the social work curriculum, it's a topic that tends to be approached in terms of the study of law, policy, and documents. There is an emerging literature on policy practice which focuses on policy advocacy and challenge in formal policy and political fora; but here, I want to make more explicit a significant but underestimated aspect of social work policy work — day-to-day work with policy on the ground—and, in raising its profile, identify its key role as a catalyst and basis for overt policy practice. While keeping abreast of changing policy and law is well established in social work teaching, the skill of critical engagement with practicalities of policy work on the ground is less well developed.

Policy work on the ground is a messy business — making sense of formal policy, finding resources to put fine words into practice and making sense of organisational strata and arrangements. In this article I want to consider how social work education can use reflection to make front-line policy work more visible to practitioners to better promote professional commitments to service-users and be more responsive to community needs.

Central to this will be identifying policy reflection as a strategy of critical practice to enable practitioners to identify and be more in control of their policy work, and to recognise the links between this everyday, matter-of-fact policy work and formal policy advocacy and change, for instance, challenging 'asset-based' practice that underneath the rhetoric of strengths promotion makes service users and communities responsible for the cost of the help they need (Evans 2018).

Critical reflection is widely promoted in social work (e.g. BASW 2019). It is valued for its intellectual recognition of the social construction of knowledge and as a practical problem-solving skill. Approaches to reflection tend to focus on the individual practitioner. Fook (2015), for instance, deploys critical ideas around power and identity to focus reflection on helping practitioners refine personal theories of practice. Ruch (2009) combines reflection with psychodynamic ideas to promoted practitioner self-care and insight-informed practice. These are important and valuable approaches to reflection, but we also need an approach to reflection that explicitly addresses policy practice on the ground as a critical issue However, focusing on individual perspectives pushes consideration of policy as an issue to the background and limits the identification of collective responses to policy constraints.

Reflection in social work has its roots— directly and indirectly — in Dewey (Leonard 2020). Dewey's approach is grounded in a commitment to empowering citizens and to democratic values. Broadhurst (2012), for instance, sees his work as '...cognisant with social work's project of improvement in individual and collective wellbeing' (298). She also sees it as an important challenge to some pessimistic critical approaches that characterise 'practitioners as ... simply neoliberal "dopes" [...rather than...] agents with transformative potential' (294). Dewey's (1971/1933) approach also resonates with the sort of critical reflexivity described by Humphries (1999) that challenges the imposition of one's own norms or taken-for-granted theories on situations to better engage with the complexities encountered in everyday practices.

It's helpful too to distinguish reflection associated with Dewey from the idea of 'communities of practice'. Below the surface similarity that both approaches recognise knowledge as socially constructed, the 'communities of practice' approach is quite different from Dewey's approach to reflection. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) note approvingly that: 'From humble beginnings in apprenticeship studies, the concept [communities of practice] was grabbed by businesses interested in knowledge management and has progressively found its way into other sectors'. And while it's an idea about informal learning ('learning networks, thematic groups, or tech clubs' etc.), it's agnostic about what is learnt and is unconcerned with the intention of those who are learning. In contrast, for Dewey, (1971/1933) reflection is committed, critical and effortful.

In the first section of this article I'll develop the idea of front-line policy practice, focusing on the everyday practical policy work that practitioners are engaged in, and which has led some commentators to describe front-line practitioners as 'street-level ministers' (Lipsky 2010:12). In the second section, I'll outline the pedagogic approach underpinning the approach to policy reflection that will be presented. This approach draws on Dewey's (1971/1933) ideas of reflective enquiry and democratic education. In the final section, I'll provide a practical description of group policy reflection workshops that are now part of the final year Masters level course in Social Work at Royal Holloway. The description will locate policy reflection within a broader framework of teaching of policy, and set out how this approach focuses on enabling students to link theory about policy with policy in practice, and develop practical strategies for policy work in advancing professional commitments to service-users and communities.

2   Dimensions of policy practice

Gal and Weiss-Gal (2013:6) summarise policy practice as: '...tasks undertaken by social workers who, as part of their professional responsibility, seek to change policies in order to better the lot of their clients. This may take place within the framework of their workplace or

outside it, as part of formal or informal activities.' It can entail the mundane, everyday tailoring of policy to make it work; resisting and shifting policy, to make it more responsive. It can also involve developing new services and creating the context within which policy can take them up; and working overtly in the political and policy systems to change or protect policies.

While policy work is a continuum, it's helpful to distinguish between hidden frontline policy practice within agencies and overt policy practice within political institutions. This distinction is important in directing us to a significant but under-considered aspect of policy work. Policy is often equated with formal documents, and identified with formal political processes. For instance, Lavee and Cohen (2019) helpfully identify social work policy entrepreneurship as an emerging aspect of policy practice. However, most social work policy work is in practitioners' engagement with policy in their day-to-day practice. Over the past two decades, policy decision-making in political institutions seems to have changed, and decisions about policy—who gets what— have increasingly shifted to service agencies. Brodkin (2020) points this out, and explains that formal policy-making fora are increasingly caught in gridlock. Policy is a fudge between different interests trying to combine conflicting demands under a veneer of coherence, and vague aspirations are often accompanied by inadequate resources. Policy decisions have been pushed down to those involved in implementing policy in street-level organisations (public bodies, voluntary organisations and private providers who deliver public services). In this context, Elmore (1979:603)'s observation that the policy/implementation distinction is '...the "noble lie" of conventional public administration and policy analysis' is writ large. Implementation is the continuing process of policy-making. Policy is not just found in documents. To understand it, we have also to look at the way in which services are organised: who decides what; and the resources that are made available (Levine 1997). To understand policy and how it's made and can be changed in a particular setting, we need to understand how these different elements are combined and balanced.

The most widespread aspect of policy work is the labour on the ground to make formal policy effective and tailor it to particular circumstances. This is an approach to policy captured in the street-level bureaucracy literature. From this perspective, formal policy is inherently incomplete. It's inevitably piecemeal, open to interpretation, subject to decisions about application; and often there's a mismatch between its rhetorical flourishes and the reality of the inadequate level of resources to put it into effect (Lipsky 2010). Historically, working with policy was seen as a positive aspect of professional practice within the welfare state, where the role of professionals was to not only make the policy work in a narrow sense, but, in recognising its limitations, to identify unmet need and translate general welfare rights into particular provision (Marshall and Rees 1985). However, in the context of new public management and managerialism within public sector organisations from the 1980s onwards, this idea of policy work on the ground has been delegitimised by the idea of managers in control, and a proceduralised context characterised as instruction and direction (Jones 1999). But this practical policy work on the ground has continued, not least because it's necessary to make services work. This is informal and often hidden policy work, which is allowed but seldom acknowledged. It may be recognised by local managers, but falls under the radar of official policy-making (Evans 2009). It's seen as just a practical response, which is not thought of as policy, but 'what we need to do', a messy process stumbling to find a way through: 'Officials do not apply knowledge (as in the received view of 'applying rules') but routinely or haltingly, find their way in and through situations by trying to make sense of them.' (Wagenaar 2020:273)

This, though, is not always the case. Concealing front-line policy practice may sometimes be a conscious and considered strategy. Practitioners may decide to resist or subvert top-down policy and managerial direction (Leonard 1997, White 2009). The choices and decisions to interpret and adapt policy on the ground can reflect a critique of that policy (Evans 2020). This has been described by Carey and Foster (2011) as 'deviant social work', and for them, policy work is an aspect of social work policy practice which has been driven underground by an antithetical political/management environment. It's a policy environment that is no longer sympathetic to the traditional role of professionals within the welfare state—adapting and extending policy to better meet service-users' needs on the ground. It's an approach also described by O'Leary (2010:8) as 'guerrilla government' where: 'public servants ... work against the wishes—either implicitly or explicitly communicated—of their superiors [...who...] typically, for strategic reasons, choose not to go public with their concerns in whole or in part.'

This highlights a concern amongst some practitioners that to openly challenge or question organisational policy — formal statements and informal practices — can be risky. It's important to consider the context, pressure and challenges in which social work policy action is understood as legitimate or not. Practitioners who do make these connections, and who may seek to challenge or change policy on the ground, may choose to hide this because of concern about possible organisational responses or peer resistance. Related to this, where peers don't understand the rationale of policy challenge, it can lead to frustration, anger or misunderstanding (Evans 2012). In working with students to explore policy practice we need not just to look at different ways to work with policy but also to recognise how and why practitioners take the approach they do to policy work; and how the environment may make it easier or harder to do that overtly and transparently, which allows public accountability, professional accountability and accountability to service-users and communities (O'Leary 2010).

3   Reflection and democratic education

Engaging with policy practice in street-level organisations has to be central to policy education in social work. It's an area of policy work that, while often hidden or dismissed as mundane, requires our attention. Because so much is habitual and assumed — 'this is how we do things' — the links between these practices and policies are often not clearly made.

In thinking about enabling students to relate to these issues about policy practice, I was drawn to Dewey's pedagogy of democratic education. As noted above, it's an approach that resonates with social work values, and recognises ethical agency and a critical commitment to examine one's own theoretical assumptions and commitments. For Dewey (1971/1933), education is about releasing human energy to investigate and participate in organising ways of living together and realising human potential through enquiry. In contrast to traditional education—which he saw as focused on individuals and achieving a narrow sense of self-reliance—democratic education is about realising human potential for all, and examining social institutions critically, searching for practical solutions to the current problems of working together as members of society. Dewey was sceptical of simply applying abstract ideas to understand particular situations, because these general notions '… do not assist enquiry: they close it down … they tell us about the state, when what we want to know about is some state' (Dewey 2012/1920: chpt. 8). He proposes a new logic of inquiry, that starts from the ground up, responding to doubt, disturbance and distress, when things don't make sense or don't work out the way we expect. This is not just a starting point but a focus that provides inquiry and reflection with a sense of purpose and direction:

> 'Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection… a question to be answered, an ambiguity to be resolved, sets up an end and holds the current of ideas to a definite channel. Every suggested conclusion is tested by its reference to this regulating end, by its pertinence to the problem in hand.'(Dewey1971/1933:14-5).

These disconcerting feelings often arise when our habitual ways of working and seeing break down and no longer help us. Recognising and using this experience underpins Dewey's view of inquiry as an active process, finding new ways of thinking and acting which are no longer at odds with our purpose in conditions we encounter. The approach entails practical reflection that tests and challenges ideas to make sense of the situation in a way that enables us to achieve our goals. This reflective inquiry entails:

> 'Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought...[and] once begun, it includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality.' (Dewey1971/1933: 9)

Central to this process are the ideas of testing against evidence and curiosity. Evidence, in contrast to assertion, is central because: 'Reflection thus implies that something is believed in (or disbelieved in), not on its own direct account, but through something else which stands as witness, evidence, proof, voucher, warrant; that is, as ground of belief.' (Dewey1971/1933:11). Curiosity is a quality of mind and awareness of purpose that gives reflection vitality. It's the: 'Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility... to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its own account, apart from any subservience to a preconceived belief or habitual aim.' (Dewey 1971/1933: 286)

Learning in this way can be an individual activity. But for Dewey it is best done as a collective task where the educator can work with groups of students: '… to establish an environment that stimulated activities…to develop skills and processes to solve problems at times of possible uncertainty – skills which could be transferable to other subjects – and for them to thrive and contribute to a democratic society.' (Aubrey and Riley 2016: 9-10)

4   Group Policy Reflection

4.1 The pedagogy of group policy reflection

In the following section I will set out how the ideas of policy practice discussed above are brought into a reflective framework to teach and develop a practical inquiry to policy practice in social work.

The format for policy reflection in the group is that an individual will take responsibility for presenting their experience of policy in practice, and the role of the group members is to act as a sounding board, to help the presenter by asking questions, clarifying their understanding and through this enriching their own perspective. The group members are, in short, critical friends. Students participating in the process have already had experience of reflective practice. Throughout the social work programme, they have worked in small reflection groups with a tutor/facilitator and established: '...a culture in which it is safe and acceptable to be open and to expose professional vulnerabilities for the sake of learning' (Fook 2015:448). The

teaching takes for granted that the culture of trust, which is central to any reflective process, has already been established.

The policy reflection groups are managed by a tutor facilitator and are made up of 10 to 12 students. The groups meet in six sessions over six weeks, while students are still on placement. Each group has two people presenting and being questioned, allowing all members of the group to present at least once. The role of the tutor/facilitator is to manage the process so that each presenter engages with all three phases. The role is also captured in Dewey's notion of 'making things interesting'. This is not a superficial demand to entertain the student/consumer in the neoliberal university. Rather it entails a focus on students' '...present experience, powers, and needs; and … (in case he does not perceive or appreciate this relevancy) the new material [is] presented in such a way as to enable the [...student...] to appreciate its bearings, its relationships, its value in connection with what already has significance for him.' (Dewey 1913: 23/4) The tutor guides and supports the presenter and group members to link their practice experience with policy work, make connections and develop creative responses.

Dewey doesn't present a hard and fast staged process of reflection but leaves it to his readers to organise a process within the framework he presents (Rodgers 2002). Rodgers (2002) suggests that the key elements of reflection in the context of professional education are: the presence of an experience upon which to reflect; the description of this experience; the analysis of this experience; and then the identification of intellect actions to their new understanding of the situation.

4.2 The experiential context of policy group reflection

Reflection presumes experience upon which participants can reflect. Experience, for Dewey is a broad notion that involves engagement with the environment at hand – interactions with others, the social world, the ideas that come into play etc (Rodgers 2002). Here I want to sketch the two key elements of the environment of experiences of participants in group policy reflection.

First, in England social work students complete two direct practice placements during their social work course (Social Work England 2021). The students involved in the policy reflection groups have current experience of working in street-level organisations and are able to bring to the reflection groups substantial experience of working with policy and within a policy context. This ensures that participants have current policy practice experiences and quandaries directly relevant to professional development to bring to their policy reflection group.

Second, the reflection groups sit within a broader module on Critical Social Work: students have had lectures which engaged them with the scholarship on policy practice outlined above, looking at the role of practitioners as policy actors and the relationship between practice and the broader political economy of care.

4.3 Describing and analysing policy experience

The first aspect of the reflective process in the group involves the presenter describing their experience of the policy context in their placement setting—what the service is, who it serves, what it's supposed to do; and the forms of policy which underpin this. The aim is to help students move beyond 'the noble lie' (Elmore 1979) that policy is simply to be found in documents, and to recognise policy in the wider context of street-level organisations,

including the habits and assumptions that operate in the setting. In preparing the presentation, the presenters are asked to remember that policy is more than just documents: it's also about the structure of the organisation. For instance: is it hierarchical or flat? People and roles; who's in charge; what's their background — professional or managerial? — and the levels of funding and resources required to do the job, and how to get access to these. Presenters are also encouraged to think back to when they first came into the placement, to try and help them recover initial impressions; or to use contrast between this and the previous placement. After the short presentation the group members, who are also aware of the same brief and its prompts, ask the presenter questions to fill in gaps and clarify their understanding of the policy context. This may mean asking about documents which they may have expected but are missing in the account; or asking how policies may sit with each other; information about funding levels—etc. The aim behind the questions is to enrich the description of policy in preparation for the next phase.

The second phase is premised on the recognition that while the student is on placement in an organisation, they are on placement as a social work student. This phase entails a critical analysis of their experience of the street-level organisation's policy, focusing on the degree to which this policy context enables or challenges ideas of good professional practice, and it may also involve the presenter being open to critically examine established practice theories in the light of experience. The presenter is asked to consider the relationship between their idea of professional practice and what policy expects. In thinking about this, they're asked to consider at least one way in which the local policy context helps them practise well; and to consider ways in which it may also constrain, limit or challenge good social work practice. Alternatively, they may want to approach this by describing what they see as their preferred model of practice; and what they see as the preferred model of practice in the placement. Again, group members help the presenter clarify their understanding of the relationship between organisational policy and good professional practice. Presenters are often asked: what does it feel like to be a social worker working with these policies? How do other social workers in the placement see their role and the policy they have to work with? Is there anything about social work practice in the setting that you would change? Is there anything that you feel is good?

These first and second phases can be challenging for students. Presenters can struggle with questions that seek clarification of their assumptions or of the attitudes that they have gleaned within their placement organisation, answering in response to questions 'you know'; 'it's obvious'; 'I can't explain'. The challenge of the process points to the power of socialisation – how quickly one can be habituated to a situation or local culture. It's a struggle to articulate a sense of disquiet and put it in the broader perspective – to intellectualise one's insight (Dewey 1971/1933). But it's a struggle that results in a sense of accomplishment and relief, in starting to make sense of what's going on (Rodgers 2002). The struggle can create a reluctance on the part of other group members to ask questions and seek clarification, because they don't want to put the presenter on the spot. A key skill of the tutor/facilitator is being sensitive to these issues and, especially in early phases, modelling the asking of questions that challenge non-answers, but in a respectful way, and pushing for clarification but also knowing when to stop—a skill that we all recognise is needed in any form of critical inquiry (Becker, 1971).This links closely to the idea of trust and respect as central to the culture of reflection.

4.4 'Intelligent actions' — Identifying practical strategies

The final, third phase in the process involves helping the presenter consider a response to challenges in the policy context arising from their analysis of their experience against the idea of critical professional practice 'to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them' (Dewey quoted in Rodgers 2002: 847); and identify their response — 'the intelligent action' (Dewey 1971/1933:17) they can take. Rogers (2002:855) describes the search for intelligent action as involving the '...knowledge and awareness of the learner, oneself, the subject matter, the contexts within which we all operate, and the dynamic interactions among all of these.... [that enables one to get to the point when] the meaning one has ascribed to an experience fits, makes sense, and can be relied on in future experiences'.

Presenters are asked, for instance, how they would complete the statement 'I can support my critical practice in this policy context by ...'. The presenter considers the coherence and contradictions in policy — how written policy, resources, and the organisation of services fit together or are in tension — and the spaces in policy that support or undermine critical commitments to professional practice and service-users and communities. After the presenter completes this statement, the group members make observations from their experience that relate to the situation to further refine how to act intelligently.

A consideration here is that the idea of professional challenge to policy may appear unsafe — especially where practitioners are viewed instrumentally by the organisation and professional commitments and values are not acknowledged by managers. In a challenging setting, action may involve something other than overt challenge to change or adapt what is done to better reflect professional values: it may be a quieter challenge of questions that point out contradictions in grandiose policy claims and parsimonious resource provision; or ensuring that professional commitments are reflected in assessments. And it may entail using collective spaces to approach policy and how it affects practice; to raising this more collectively through professional groups or a union meeting—etc.

5   Conclusion

Policy practice covers a wide range of approaches to working with policy. In this article I have focused on the use of reflection (drawing on Dewey's work on democratic education) as a pedagogic approach to enable students to develop skills in everyday policy practice. This level of policy work, while often below the radar when policy is discussed in social work, plays a pivotal role in determining who gets what—policy on the ground. I've sought to outline a structured approach to reflection that enables participants to recognise, evaluate and develop their frontline policy practice. Overall, the process of structured policy reflection involves three phases: describing the policy context in the round; evaluating it against expectations of good critical practice; and then identifying steps to work with policy to better enable or to continue sustaining professional commitments. In each group session there will be one or two people presenting in turn, with the remaining group members asking questions. Underpinning the process is both an understanding of policy work and the pedagogy of democratic education, thus enabling group participants—as presenter or critical friend—to translate the ideas of policy work into concrete examples and situations; and to do this in a focused way that develops critical questioning and concrete solutions to seeking change or sustaining positive aspects of the policy context.

Dewey's pragmatism is at the core of this article: in the approach to policy reflection presented here; and in its knowledge claims. Dewey (1971/1933) was sceptical of general truths, theoretical certainties, and hard and fast answers. In place of 'the truth,' he posits

inquiry. Inquiry is committed to democratic values and addresses challenges and problems to identify considered solutions relevant to situations. The approach presented to policy reflection is a solution to helping students engage with practical policy work within the context of social work training. But I don't want to suggest that it's the solution. Its relevance is analogous – it's a possible approach in similar situations. And it's not an approach that's a fixed product or a measurable intervention. Instead, it's an approach that is open to adaption and change in line with the circumstances of use in the spirit of pragmatic inquiry and action.

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