

2 Problems of Policy and Development

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John Rodhouse draws attention to the fact that identifying educational problems in small or large states often implies an obligation to provide a solution. Experience suggests that while the circumstances described as 'problems' in widely different contexts may be very similar, the 'solutions' tend to be more idiosyncratic. The value to small states of sharing their understanding of 'problems' is more likely to lead to a deeper perception of the nature of the 'problems' than to the identification of commonly acceptable 'solutions'. This is not to say that the solution adopted by one country will not be of interest and value to another; indeed, it should stimulate ideas and reactions which may lead to a solution. If geography and other circumstances so indicate, two or more small states may formulate a shared solution; but it is most unlikely that the solution which works in one country will be immediately applicable in another.

He notes a further difficulty. It is a feature of small educational systems that those actively engaged in the formulation and development of policy are also frequently involved in the practical day-to-day operation of the system. Consequently, because of this duality of roles, it is not always easy for the individual, or others, to see clearly where policy-making ends and practical application begins. In such circumstances policy tends to emerge from practice in a somewhat

pragmatic fashion. The leaders in small systems are obliged to recognise this as a fact of small system life. In referring to policy and development programmes and their formulation, no clear distinction can be drawn between policy makers and practitioners. All those who work within a small educational system are in a position to exert a direct influence upon it. People in small systems are so closely bound together that they cannot maintain totally separate and discrete roles.

Questions of policy

It is worth looking to see whether there are any particular conditions which characterise policy-making and policies in small educational systems, and whether those characteristics can be classified as positive or negative in their effects. Some of them may apply more widely in small states and may not be peculiar to educational systems alone.

One obvious characteristic of a small system is that it engages relatively few people in its activity. People produce ideas and if the numbers of teachers and administrators/advisers are limited (and equally the numbers of politicians) then the generation of ideas may also be limited. In such circumstances there is a strong temptation to rely upon borrowing from the thinking current in larger systems, on the assumption that ideas tested in that context will be applicable to conditions in the small system. In other words, education systems in small nation states are seen simply as miniature versions of larger systems, and all that is needed is for modifications to be made to take account of size. While ideas from the large system will certainly contain familiar elements, and clearly some educational policies can have almost universal application, most of the policies adopted in large countries will need considerable adaptation to meet the needs of small systems. Some ideas and policies will be inappropriate and potentially counter-productive.

The relatively small numbers of people involved in formally identifying policies in the system leads to a much closer identification of ideas with particular individuals. As a result policies can become personalised to an extent which is unlikely to apply in a larger system.

This can be a force of enormous benefit if the person to whom the policy is attached has high status and is respected. If the reverse applies then the idea/policy can become tainted by the person perceived as presenting it for acceptance. The obvious danger in this situation is that policies are determined not on the merits of the proposals but on the acceptability of the proposer. One of the ways of avoiding this danger is to take over impersonal ideas from other systems. While the approach appears to be attractive, it carries with it other great dangers, built as it is on systems and social and political contexts which differ from those found in the small state. There is no real escape from the very personal nature of the small system; it is best to accept it and to exploit its strengths, although this should not be at the expense of public participation in policy-making, something which smallness of scale can make a practical proposition.

Good practitioners are the growth points in the small system; identified and given proper encouragement they should be able to contribute as much to the process of policy-making as any of the more orthodox policy-makers of the larger system. Elements of success are often undervalued in small countries, perhaps because of a failure to recognise them. Their exploitation calls for recognition that practice and policy go together. Instead of separating practitioners and policy-makers, the good practitioners should be encouraged to assist in developing policies that will spread the good practices more widely through the system.

However, as Farrugia describes elsewhere in this volume, good practitioners are often poorly equipped to act as policy-makers. Their training and experience do not normally provide them with a range of personal and interpersonal skills, together with the ability to analyse and construct, that will enable them to distil from what they do the components of policy. This can be overcome with the help of short-term periods of secondment. The good practitioner can be taken away from the chalkface for three to six months, with a specific task to identify needs in a given area of the education service and to put forward proposals to meet those needs. The result will not only be a piece of local research directed to national requirements, with

practical proposals for action, but also the first stage in the creation of an effective contributor to policy-making. It is sometimes assumed that it is best to concentrate on one or two good practitioners and to give them a series of secondments. While that may be appropriate for the training of the future leaders of the system, greater benefits will accrue to the system as a whole if over a period of time a larger number of good practitioners have the experience of contributing to policy-making, while maintaining their close contact with the everyday working of the school system. In other words, in-service development of educational practitioners, on a regular basis, is a critical factor for the overall improvement of the system.

A strategy of developing growth points in the system will lead to continuing interaction between those engaged in the delivery of educational services and those responsible for their planning and administration. Not only are the policy outcomes likely to be more readily and swiftly transmitted into practice throughout the system but the very real problems of people and time available to reflect upon long-term needs will be ameliorated.

This lack of time is another inevitable consequence of small scale. Larger organisations can provide some of their members with time, free of day-to-day pressures and demands, to give to the careful analysis and synthesis that policy-making demands. Generally the people in small systems who are expected to project future trends and identify emerging needs are engaged in the daily tasks of coping with current crises and immediate demands. Forward thinking, projection of needs and framing of policy options has to find a place in gaps in daily business or in the margins of professional existence. The harnessing of the talents and the energy that are distributed around the system is vitally necessary if independence is to be maintained.

One further characteristic of policy-making in small educational systems should be recognised. Resources are limited and usually fully utilised. This refers to human resources, finance and materials. Policies are therefore defined firstly in terms of existing resources, and may be constrained by the need to give priority to the continuance of the current service. Policy proposals are not considered

in the abstract but are judged immediately in relation to the resources which are already committed and those that can be seen as likely to be available in the foreseeable future. The small system may find it very difficult to make long-term decisions. As a result there is a strong temptation to adopt as models for future development those presented by the larger, and sometimes more developed, systems. If the temptation can be resisted, and if in-service development of local staff is properly planned, there is the possibility of producing policies more appropriate to indigenous needs and resource capacity.

These characteristics which appear to be particularly relevant in small educational systems are accompanied by other conditions which can act as severe constraints. The ready-made solutions of the large systems are very attractive and may appear to fit the small system's requirements reasonably well. For a variety of reasons such solutions may be adopted and they can then begin to have severely adverse effects. Those effects must then be remedied and that can consume time and energy which would have been much better used in developing a truly local solution. Overcoming such mismatches is often very costly.

The small system is prone to what can only be described as incoherence in policy-making. Whereas the larger system can absorb a measure of mismatch of policies because the lack of matching will occur in particular areas or at particular times, the small system is very exposed. Lack of coherence of policies is readily seen and the results quickly felt; there is no umbrella of broadly defined policy as exists in the large system under which such lack of coherence can be sheltered. Yet the very circumstances that make lack of coherence less acceptable make it more difficult to achieve. A common antidote is to maintain a rigid uniformity of pattern and performance. While this has the advantage of ensuring that policy once made is equally applied, it does little to promote that evolution of good practice into policy described above; an evolution which can lead to successful policy-making in the small system.

Possibilities for development

The distinction between policy and development may not be sharply defined, easily discerned or clearly articulated. Some of the conditions and characteristics of policy-making will be replicated in the overall development of the education system. Development is a process which is dependent upon action and reaction, and it is therefore very closely related to the nature and quality of the human resources of the system and on the strengths of the individuals engaged in its management. There is a sense here in which strength can have a literal meaning. Development requires a sustained and continued effort from those working in the service. While they may be convinced of the rightness of a policy and be committed to the development of the service, the constant pressure of immediate events in the system may absorb all their energies. The managers of a small educational system are rarely able to act as specialists. They are expected to cover a very wide range of activities and sectors. As a result, the development of the education service in a small state must follow the strengths of its leaders. Where they have expertise there will be development; where their skills are lacking and specialist knowledge is limited, there will be a tendency to stagnate. Though this effect can be partially overcome by introducing outside specialist skills for specific purposes and for limited periods, it remains a constraint upon development in small systems.

One means of widening the range over which development can take place is in-service education and training (INSET). Usually INSET is seen as the provision of courses for teachers within the system or the sending of individual teachers outside the system in order to study elsewhere. Two points can usefully be made about INSET in small educational systems. The first is that the cascade model in which teachers from several schools receive training and then impart their newly acquired skills to their colleagues is in reality very imperfect in operation and uncertain in effect. Too much depends upon the status and respect accorded to the individual

teacher in his/her own school. Small systems are very prone to what may be described as 'the prophet without honour syndrome'. More effective INSET can be provided within the school or institution itself; the expert who spends time working with the staff of a school developing their collective as well as their individual skills will have a greater and more lasting effect.

The second point is that INSET takes time and energy from the system and it must be seen to repay more than it consumes. Too often in the small educational system INSET, which should be a means of enriching the whole, becomes an impoverishment. The balance between the aspirations of the individual and the needs of the system is much more critical than in the large system. In large-scale operations the balance is normally weighted in favour of the individual; the advantage of greater motivation more than justifies the 'waste' that results. The small system must weigh the balance in its own favour; the bias must be towards meeting its own needs. In the small system there must be a clearly defined objective for INSET, not only for the participants but also for the system and its institutions. Only in terms of benefit to the system can the cost of INSET be justified. However strong the case for an individual's personal needs, the investment of time, energy and money will not be worthwhile unless the meeting of those needs can be seen as a contribution to meeting the wider needs and development of the system.

That may seem a harsh doctrine when compared with the practice of large educational systems. But the small organisation must husband its resources and energies even more carefully. Large-scale systems can afford an element of waste, of 'casting bread upon the waters'; small systems do not generally have much bread to cast. The individual who takes more than a fair share of INSET resources for personal development may be the only one of very few who can be given such an opportunity. Therefore the system depends very heavily on the successful training of those very few individuals. In the large system there are likely to be many individuals who benefit from training. The chances are greater that there will be some from whom the system will receive substantial benefit.

Experimentation is difficult in the small system; it is likely to be conducted in the public eye and under continuous scrutiny. Failure when it comes, and come it must sometimes, is quickly brought to notice and made the subject of comment. Evidence of wasted effort and initiatives that did not succeed, which elsewhere must assume very large proportions in order to be noticed at all, in small systems is highlighted and condemned. In some ways far too much is expected of the small system and failure to match up to those expectations is not easily forgiven.

This leads to a further constraint upon development. The knowledge that failure will be so public adds to the inertia that is said to pervade all educational systems. Better to do well what is accepted than risk poor performance of new methods, the introduction of yet untried skills, the promotion of changing values and attitudes. The small system calls for professional and political courage which must be sustained through personal contact and confidence. In this the relationship between the political and professional leadership is crucial; there need not be philosophical agreement but there must be mutual respect.

Summary

The policies which will determine the nature of educational provision in small states should:

- relate directly to the identified needs of the community, the educational service and its users
- be readily perceived by all the participants in the process
- be judged on the extent to which the education service meets the community's needs
- draw upon the best practice in the service and encourage and allow good practice to develop and flourish
- be framed within present and foreseeable resources but make due allowance for the introduction of change

The development of educational services in a small state will:

- call for careful use of all resources both human and material
- depend upon the effective use of INSET focused on defined local needs: so far as possible this should be delivered locally
- require mutual respect and confidence between the political and professional leadership of the service and the confidence of the practitioners in that leadership

The saving grace of small educational systems is that because they are small the problems they encounter are small in scale. In consequence they fall within the dimensions which make them manageable. They need never become so large that they overwhelm the system entirely.