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# Education policy rhetoric and reality gap: a reflection

Education policy  
rhetoric

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to discuss why there is often a gulf of difference between policy rhetoric and reality. In particular, the paper seeks to explore issues with the policy rhetoric, implementation process and the lens through which reality is perceived, explaining why these issues can open up a policy rhetoric-reality gap. This article also suggests a simple matrix framework to analyse a rhetoric-reality gap.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is a reflection on, and analysis of, the issue of the difference between policy rhetoric and reality. The framework of analysis involves: issues with policy rhetoric; issues with the implementation process; issues with examining reality.

**Findings** – Although policy rhetoric always has laudable aims, the underlying dynamics of change and interaction among the various actors at different levels of the system often means that the rhetoric may be compromised in reality. However, it is also possible that even when implementation reality may not correspond closely to policy rhetoric, the adaptation of the policy allows for a better fit with the local context while allowing the policy rhetoric to retain its evocative values for an ideal state of affairs.

**Practical implications** – Policy rhetoric-reality is not always “evil” and this gap can be systematically investigated.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides an explanation of the policy rhetoric-reality gap and suggests a simple matrix framework to analyse such a gap.

**Keywords** Educational policy, Rhetoric, Reality

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

In education, catch phrases, such as educational excellence, decentralisation, diversity, autonomy, stakeholders’ involvement, marketing, privatisation, public responsibility and quality assurance, to name just a few of the hotly contested topics concerning education governance, shape much of the current debate. Education governance of course permeates almost all matters of challenge faced by schools, higher education institutions and state authorities. It mediates issues of external stewardship, government control, internal leadership, iterative communication, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring.

One characteristic of education governance is that there is often a gap between policy rhetoric and actual ground reality. The selected economies (Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and India) have responded to the global trends of marketisation, decentralisation, privatisation and commodification, resulting from the growing impact of neo-liberalism and economic rationalism (refer to Mok’s introductory article in this special issue). Whether in schools or higher education institutes, public or private education, the various papers in this volume have either



attested or alluded to a gap between the policy rhetoric and the ground reality. This happens not only in Asia. This happens all over the world, including the USA and its “no child left behind” policy and the UK and its New Labour education policies to ensure children from every background get the best start in life. This phenomenon gives rise to an important question: why is there such a difference?

### **Why is there a rhetoric-reality gap?**

There have been broad debates regarding the gaps between policy intention and policy implementation (for example Levinson and Sutton, 2001; Spillane *et al.*, 2002). While there is more work to be done to refine the conceptualisation of action and response both within and between system levels which leads to emergence of some form of “implementation gap” (Wallace, 1991) between policy-makers’ stated vision of the impact of new policies and what happens in target schools and institutions, this article offers a few reasons why such a gap exists. These reasons are categorised as follows:

- issues with policy rhetoric;
- issues with the implementation process;
- issues with examining reality.

#### *Issues with policy rhetoric*

Policy rhetoric is sometimes more symbolic than actionable. That means that it stands for something ideal and hopefully inspiring. It can be translated into actionable steps, but none of which, even on completion, will match up to its lofty aims.

For example, the ubiquitous “excellence” in education policy rhetoric is more a symbolic expression than an actual achievable reality. The paper by Ng and Chan in this issue on the Singapore’s School Excellence Model and the Hong Kong’s School Based Management illustrates how the term actually stands for an ideal state. The implementation of quality models and inspections is hardly able to achieve the state of “excellence” in a culture of fierce competition and accountability. But the term gives the policy rhetoric a lofty and positive feeling, one that educators can hardly argue with. Using rhetoric as a symbolic expression is very much practised in many other parts of the world. Gillies’ (2007, p. 32) comment of the United Kingdom’s Labour government’s use of the term “excellence” in its policy rhetoric is illuminating:

On the one hand it appeals to the Right, and elitist views of education, while simultaneously it can be held out as a torch for the Left: excellence for all, regardless of background. And it is here that the positive connotations of excellence become so hard to counteract. A critic of the goal of excellence can easily be portrayed as negative, un-ambitious, harbouring low expectations of the disadvantaged, or, on the other hand, as content with the mediocre, the “bog standard”, uninterested in tending to the needs of the gifted and able. “Excellence” thus becomes a perfect example of New Labour’s double-coding (Fairclough, 2000): rich in connotative power; appealingly malleable and ambiguous in meaning.

Much policy rhetoric aims to influence the discourse which shapes perceptions among those involved in implementation, “to establish a discursive consensus” over time, with the ideological aim of adding to “the construction of a hegemonic common-sense about education” (Poulson, 1996, p. 585). Moreover, policy rhetoric is in some cases a spin – using language and managing information shed favourable light on the policy makers

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(usually the politicians and senior officials) and their policies, in the eyes of the public or specific audiences. The official rhetoric is different from actual political agenda. The espoused theory (the explicit policy rhetoric) is different from the actual theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Because there is a growing academic interest in discourse analysis of policy rhetoric (for example Nicoll and Edwards, 2004), the rhetoric-reality gap shows up even more clearly. The politicians are keen to maintain an impression of coming from moral high ground and this may fly in the face of transparency and substance in policy-making. For example, under the rhetoric of decentralisation, the Hong Kong government actually re-centralised authority, regaining of control of the schools from the School Sponsoring Bodies (SSB) and shifting the operation of schools to a model in which it has control of (refer to article by Ng and Chan in this issue). The end result was that the Catholic Diocese, one of the main SSB in Hong Kong, filed a writ against the government, claiming the action to be unconstitutional. There was a gap between policy rhetoric and reality.

Because of the need to present a more favourable picture, policy rhetoric often highlights the benefits and generalises the application, while skirting the issues of trade-offs and ignoring the local context. Rotberg (2005, p. 611) argued:

The political rhetoric about school reform makes it sound easy. Apparently, whatever the proposed reform - testing, reduced class size, vouchers - there are no tradeoffs or "costs" to consider. Or the tradeoffs are judged to be so insignificant that they do not merit discussion. There is also an unspoken premise that countries with effective education systems (i.e. high test scores) have gotten it right without ever having had to make difficult choices or cope with negative consequences. The rest of us could do the same if we would only adopt some other country's system. Finally, the societal context of school reform is often ignored, despite the fact that a country's priorities, values, and economic status ultimately play a major role in determining whether reforms can be implemented as planned.

### *Issues with implementation process*

Education policy formulation and implementation is a complex and contested process (Ball, 1990, 1994a; Karlsson *et al.*, 2001), especially in a large, multilevel system. Implementation is affected by the dynamical interaction between the central government and other system levels, where different values and survival issues take central stage. Central government initiatives are often met by responses at other levels of the education system which may not be aligned with the rhetoric of the reform. Therefore, even well-planned educational changes are subject to a process of mutual adaptation (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978), where the intentions of initiators at one level in the education system are reinterpreted to a greater or lesser extent by the implementers at the next level, and subsequently down the line, resulting in a gap between rhetoric and reality. Even with a well-meaning policy change, using in a consultative approach with stakeholders, policy-makers and implementers at different levels have to mediate conflicting imperatives, navigate turbulent relationships and compromise certain ideals in the rhetoric so as to find a middle-ground for action. In fact, the implementation of national policies may stimulate resistance and co-optation in target schools and institutions at other system levels, leading to subversion of these policies, a phenomenon known as counter-policy (Hall and Wallace, 1993; Wallace, 1998). Also policies vary in the room offered for cycles of interpretation and

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reinterpretation during implementation, not merely in terms of discourse, but in terms of practice (Ball, 1994b; Hatcher and Troyna, 1994). Therefore, in the case where the target schools and institutions are far removed from the powers of the central government, the room for “generous interpretation” of policy or even feigned ignorance of policy is substantial, resulting in a bigger rhetoric-reality gap. In the case where the target schools and institutions are within range of the powers of the central government, if the beliefs and values of the two parties are different, there will be under-currents beneath a mirage of submission, giving rise again to a rhetoric-reality gap.

However, not all ground reactions are necessarily moves to counter the imposition of policy. These “reactions” can be the results of proactive local policy agenda brought about because of the stimulation of national level policies but aimed at “localising” the initiatives. Thus, policy implementation in reality can be viewed as a process of policy transformation as it adapts itself in the local context. This adaptation process depends on the agency of local actors and the sense they make of the policy as they engage with it, interpret it and redefine it. In this case, policy implementation is then seen as a form of meaning making of policy rhetoric in a changing discursive local environment. The result is the reality that local actors experience. The experience may differ from the original rhetoric.

In any planned change, unintended consequences can occur, usually through the unseen dynamics of interactive actions of various parties in the change process (Senge, 1990; Jian, 2007). For example, China’s investment in building world-class universities, while making some headway in the top universities, led also to bureaucratization of the university sector in China (read Ngok’s paper in this issue). In India, the Supreme Court’s decision to concede to the state governments’ right to establish private universities in 1972, in the absence of national level vision, direction, legislation and regulation, led to both the flourishing of private universities in India and the proliferation of judicial interventions, in order to settle administrative disputes of common entrance tests or fixing of the fees (read Gupta’s paper in this issue). In Singapore and Hong Kong, quality assurance through model models and inspections, while ensuring quality on the one hand, creates its own side effects to compromise quality on the other (Read Ng and Chan’s paper in this issue). Therefore, policy implementation is not a clinical and linear process. Even with control measures, it is a complex process with extensive ramifications that can open up an unintended rhetoric-reality gap.

#### *Issues with examining reality*

Other than issues with policy rhetoric and implementation, another issue related to the rhetoric-reality gap is how one understands and describes “reality”. One’s understanding of “reality” depends on the lens one uses. Implementing an education policy is like changing the course of a stream. If one desires a stream to alter its course for irrigation purposes, one would erect a structure to guide the flow of the water to the desired farm area. The stream alters its course according to the structure. At the macro level, the policy alters ground reality as planned. This will be the picture that policy-makers wish to see and refer to. However, if one examines “reality” through an electron-microscope, then one finds that the movement of the individual water molecule

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chaotic. There is no discernible pattern until one observes events from a vantage point of view and realises that the chaotic movement of water molecules have somehow given rise to the flow of a stream that has just altered its course. So, which picture represents “reality”? The paradox is that both pictures, seemingly contradicting, represent reality. Policy implementation, even if successful, does not guarantee that every target institution flows along with the rhetoric. At the macro level, the policy has achieved its aims – there are government statistics to substantiate the claim. At the micro level, some institution’s experience may be the exact opposite of what the rhetoric claims. Any analysis of the rhetoric-reality gap must take into account this difference in “reality” among the different system levels.

Moreover, other than this “zooming” effect, there is a need to clarify the focus of analysis. Using the zoom lens of a camera as a metaphor, one can take a picture of a nice garden and form a favourable impression of the garden. One can also zoom into a close-up of a beautiful flower and form a favourable impression of the garden. But one may also zoom into a small pile of mud and come to a different conclusion about this garden. Therefore, any analysis of the rhetoric-reality gap must take into account this difference in “reality” because the analysis may be focused on different aspects or dimensions of reality.

Taking into the account of the differences in system levels and dimensions of focus, this article offers a simple matrix framework to analyse a “rhetoric-reality gap”. Adapted partially from the Organisational Change Model (Ng, 2004, 2005), one axis of this matrix framework examines the gap between the policy rhetoric and the actual ground reality through the following five dimensions:

- (1) *Goals*: are the stated goals in the policy rhetoric the same as that pursued by the education institutions?
- (2) *Business* (programmes supporting the goals): are the programmes envisioned in the policy rhetoric the same as that implemented by the education institutions?
- (3) *Culture*: does the policy rhetoric assume a mindset different from that found in the education institutions?
- (4) *Processes*: are the processes espoused in the policy rhetoric the same as the implementation processes on the ground level experienced by the education institutions?
- (5) *Resources*: are the resources “promised” in the policy rhetoric the same as that channelled to the education institutions?

The other axis of the matrix framework examines each dimension at the different levels of the system as appropriate to the issue. Policy rhetoric-reality gap analysis needs to differentiate between education governance issues and viewpoints related to steering schools and higher education institutions at their individual level, and to those related to steering entire systems. Both worlds will consider the challenges differently, and relevant points of consideration to one level may not necessarily imply relevance to the other. Therefore, this differentiation of school and system levels will help to clarify matters. On the other hand, because the interfaces between the tiers are not clinically defined, users of this thinking framework will have to bear in mind the complexity of

reality and the non-linear and iterative interactions between the between system levels, so as to take into account the emergence of complex dynamics. An example of how such a framework may look is shown in Figure 1.

While such a table (as presented in Figure 1) is understandably non-exhaustive and over-simplifies the dynamic nature of the interaction among different system levels and dimensions, it can be a useful framework to describe and analyse the gap between policy rhetoric and ground reality. This gives policy-makers, ground practitioners and researchers a common set of lens and language to understand and communicate the gap between current reality and the envisaged future state, potentially improving interaction and collaboration.

### Conclusion

From the experiences of education reform in many countries, it is clear that there is a gap between policy rhetoric and reality. This article puts forward possible ways of explaining why such a gap exists and a simple matrix framework to analyse the gap.

The experiences of the economies mentioned in this volume suggest common lessons for other economies states to note. While the notions of “decentralisation”, “school autonomy”, “quality education” and “school excellence” are all laudable aims, on closer inspection, the underlying dynamics of change and interaction among the various actors at different levels of the system also mean that the rhetoric may be compromised in reality.

However, on a more positive note, this gap is not necessarily an “evil” one. Rhetoric usually speaks of ideals through malleable and nebulous language. It can signal various desiderata or directions but may not rigidly determine which concrete actions to be embedded within. So, even when implementation reality may not correspond closely to policy rhetoric, it is possible that the adaptation of the policy allows for a better fit with the local context while allowing the policy rhetoric to retain its evocative values for an ideal state of affairs.

Critics may fault the current reform notions of “decentralisation”, “school autonomy”, “quality education” and “school excellence” for being nothing more than hot air and reek of political agenda rather than educational agenda. However, Fullan (2007, p. 7) opines that “reform is not just putting into place the latest policy. It means changing the cultures of the classrooms, the schools, the districts, the universities, and so on”. Therefore, while a policy rhetoric-reality gap will continue to exist as part of the process of change, real progress can be made for the ones receiving education if school leaders could turn difficult situations into opportunities to shake-up and rejuvenate

|                       | Goals | Business | Culture | Processes | Resources |
|-----------------------|-------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| Central Government    |       |          |         |           |           |
| State Authorities     |       |          |         |           |           |
| District Officials    |       |          |         |           |           |
| Education Institution |       |          |         |           |           |

**Figure 1.**  
Example of a framework

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their schools (Fullan, 2006) and educators respond positively to their immediate circumstances. Education policy rhetoric

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