Explaining, framing and forming of the National Improvement Framework

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Introduction

The National Improvement Framework (NIF) was launched in January 2016 by the Scottish Government as a tool for achieving excellence and equity.

A study of how the NIF has come to be formed immediately 'on the ground' is needed. (Mowat, 2018). However, in order to do this, it is necessary to consider how policy ideas are framed through wider Discourse and subsequently explained in policy texts (Adams, 2016).

This study therefore has the following aims:

1. What wider Discourses have permitted or constrained opportunities for action provided by the NIF?
2. How is the NIF explained in official policy texts?
3. How is the NIF formed at the local level by teachers?

Policy as position

Adams (2011) suggests that policy is formed at the micro level through conversations at that level. It is during conversations that individuals 'position' themselves and others which can be accepted, rejected or modified (Burr, 2003). This depends on the combination of personal attributes that can allow or prevent action as a result of the rights, duties and obligations associated with a particular position (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999).

By using positioning theory, the connections between the three elements of the positioning triangle - 'storylines', 'positions' and 'social force of language' - can be examined (Adams, 2016).

Policy as position is not a reaction to policy, but rather a vehicle by which policy is subject to formation and reformation through conversation (Adams, 2011).
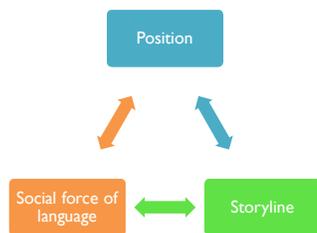
Figure 1 – the positioning triangle

Whilst policy texts attempt to offer 'position calls' to the reader, such calls do not occur outside of the historical, social, political and economic sphere in which they are embedded. Therefore, policy as position allows us to do 3 things:

- Interrogate policy texts for constraints and opportunities through the position calls they espouse; *policy-explaining*
- Examine the wider Discourse which frame policy ideas; *policy-framing*
- Consider the conversations that attempt to understand policy which themselves actually constitutes policy formation; *policy-forming*

Methodology
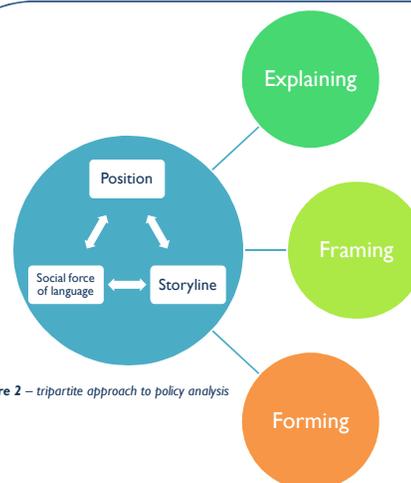
Figure 2 – tripartite approach to policy analysis

- Fairclough's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis was employed to examine how the NIF was **explained** in policy texts and by using the literature, to examine wider Discourse that **framed** the NIF;
- Semi-structured interviews with 17 primary teachers were conducted and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to understand how the NIF was being **formed.**

Findings

Policy ideas are **framed** through a mixture of position calls espousing a Scottish identity, Scotland in a globalised society and education as a way of achieving equity. These position calls frame discontent with the current position of Scottish education namely, attainment and in particular the poverty-related attainment gap (problematisation), and offers a way of combating this through the provision of information and action (argumentation).

The NIF was **explained** using a careful blend of phrases, words and images (some of which changed between versions). These offer position calls espousing education as a top priority, the child at the centre and narratives constructed around promoting 'improvement', 'the gap', 'equity' and a 'growth of numbers'.

Teachers positioned the NIF as a way of a setting out a vision, improving attainment and [for some] promoting professionalism. Policy was **formed** in a range of ways including an increase in pupil assessment, 'keeping data on track' through data stories, frequent reporting and [sometimes] reducing pupil achievement to colour-coding on a spreadsheet. There is [some] evidence of 'gaming' to "get the data up" evident in locally formed practices, including prioritising PEF funding for the lower school.

References

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