

Policy and Change: Getting Beyond Bureaucracy

LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND¹

Teachers College, Columbia University

One of the toughest nuts to crack in educational change is policy itself – not this policy or that policy, but the basic ways in which policy is conceived, developed and put into practice.

In this chapter, Linda Darling-Hammond outlines a new paradigm for educational policy better suited to the complexities of our times. In place of top-down, linear approaches to educational policy and its implementation, Darling-Hammond argues for a more inclusive approach to policy that combines and integrates bottom-up and top-down approaches in a framework that will be more empowering for all. Darling-Hammond argues for policy processes that create political consensus, ensure equity, develop and enforce standards and build local capacity, school-by-school for people who work in the front lines of our classrooms. Policies she says, should be more concerned with learning than compliance, as much about support as pressures and demands. She closes her chapter with specific instances of where such new paradigm policy processes in education are already beginning to emerge.

Change is a constant for educational systems. As every society's frontline institutions for social coherence, cultural continuity, and economic progress, schools must always cope simultaneously with provocations to change and conservative forces to preserve tradition. Creating school systems that can balance these forces and continually respond to their students' and societies' ever-evolving needs is always a challenge. In times of great social ferment and transformation, like the one in which we currently find ourselves, the challenge is even greater.

Three circumstances facing contemporary schools make the tasks of educational change particularly fascinating and particularly problematic. These are, first, the growing importance of educational success to individuals and societies around the world which provokes a corresponding need to create much more productive schools quickly. Second, the explosion of knowledge and the rapid pace of technological change suggest that what students will need to learn – and what schools might be expected to transmit – is both more complex and more difficult to codify in easily managed policy tools like curriculum guides, textbooks, and tests. The knowledge and capacities of frontline educators, and the responsiveness of the organizations they work in, become much more important in this situation. Third, much of the task of preparing many more citizens for more complex kinds of learning is contingent upon dealing well with diversity, a task that twentieth century bureaucracies are ill-equipped to handle.

As societies increasingly require the full range of human abilities potentially available to it, developmental strategies that build the capacities of individuals

and institutions are ever more necessary. Glaser (1990) describes how 21st century demands require that schools shift from a selective mode, “characterized by minimal variation in the conditions for learning” in which “a narrow range of instructional options and a limited number of ways to succeed are available,” to an adaptive mode in which “the educational environment can provide for a range of opportunities for success. Conceptions of learning and modes of teaching are adjusted to individuals – their backgrounds, talents, interest, and the nature of past performance.” From a societal perspective, Glaser explains:

This adaptive mode is especially relevant to today’s aspirations for schooling. . . . As we move toward the 21st century, we are becoming more pluralistic and diverse than at any time in our history, and aspects of schooling that may make sense in relatively homogeneous societies are probably less workable in our country. In adaptive education. . . the intent is to focus on the needs and potential of each individual and to develop these to a high extent.

An eleven-nation study of teaching conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1994) characterized new cross-national expectations this way:

The new challenges and demands for schools and teachers emerge from new and heightened expectations of schools, advances in research on teaching and learning and the need to manage classrooms that are increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. These new challenges and demands require new capacities and knowledge on the part of teachers. The current situation is both dynamic and varied. Schools are now being organised in different ways, in terms of both the tasks and the responsibilities assigned to teachers and the differentiation of roles among teachers and between teachers and other school staff. . . The breadth of the challenges and demands and the pace of change make the current situation different than in earlier years. Teachers must be able to accommodate continuing changes – dramatic in some countries – in the content of what is to be taught and how it can be taught best (p. 9).

A NEW PARADIGM FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The changed mission for education rests on a new set of understandings about teaching and learning, and it requires a new framework for school reform, one in which policymakers shift their efforts from *designing controls* intended to direct the system to *developing capacity* that enables schools and teachers to be responsible for student learning and responsive to diverse and changing student and community needs, interests, and concerns. Capacity-building requires different policy tools and different approaches to producing, sharing, and using knowledge than those traditionally used throughout this century.