

CHAPTER 2

SPACE, PLACE AND POLICY MAKING: DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores some possible theoretical frameworks which could provide a starting point for discussing policy processes. This will involve a critical engagement with some ideas from different disciplines concerning notions of space and place, especially as they relate to discourse and the making of education policy. In this context the term 'critical engagement' is concerned with a commitment to social justice and to joining with the work of others in different fields to contribute to the same ends as that described by Dutton for architecture:

An architecture of social responsibility (worthy of the name) resists dominant social trends in order to promote social justice and 'radical democracy' and works towards liberation by helping groups achieve a spatial voice in new forms of community and solidarity, conceived within difference. (Dutton, 1996, p. 159)

Could the research process itself provide an arena in which the voices of others, those involved in, or affected by, the issues being explored, would find a space? What would it mean to promote social justice and 'radical democracy' through the research process, or would it be enough to explore these issues through the research questions, data collection and analysis? I cannot claim to have shared power in the design and process of the research and the voices of children and young people are rarely heard. What I have tried to do is to make visible some of the obscured processes through which decisions are made about where some children go to school, and to raise questions about these in relation to issues of democracy, transparency and equality. This has involved borrowing ideas and terminology from different disciplines, and using them to provide fresh vantage points from which to explore familiar issues.

Terminology

Some of the terminology used in this and later chapters is more usually associated with social and cultural geography or with other disciplines, but – of course – as in any discipline, geographers themselves don't all use terminology in a uniform way. Some of the sharpest struggles within individual disciplines are about language and meanings. I make no claims for my use of borrowed terms, or for their linguistic

or disciplinary legitimacy, except that they have extended the vocabulary at my disposal and made it possible to think and write about everyday issues from a number of different angles. As soon as you begin to use words like ‘boundary’ or ‘place’ in ways which are both physical and political in relation to schools, for example, you have a new set of concepts with which to critically evaluate political or historical accounts and rationales applied to education.

Here, and in later chapters. I use the term **landscape** to refer to the shape, the history, the practices and the constant changes associated with particular spaces or contexts. This use of the term encompasses temporal, spatial and cultural qualities as well as the attitudes, memories and associations of communities and individuals. The term **space** is used to refer to amorphous areas – metaphorical and literal – in which, and through which, places, practices and identities are formed and reformed. The terms **place** and **site**, used interchangeably, are defined by ‘specific social activities with a culturally given identity (name) and image’ (Shields, 1991, p. 30). Spaces and places are known by their physical shapes and appearance, as well as by their purpose, history and reputation. Place identities, as well as being shaped by consensual, public meanings, also connect to individual autobiographies and associations.

The term **arena**, in the context of the discussions which follow in later chapters, is distinguished from *place* and *site* in that it is used to refer specifically to areas in which policies are advanced, opposed, made and mediated through practice and discourse – or ‘... wherever there is debate and decisions are made’ (Fulcher, 1999). There are stable, permanent, or semi-permanent arenas such as parliamentary or council meetings, and meetings of parent-teacher associations or trade union members – and more informal, but none the less regular, arenas such as gatherings of parents at the school gates at the end of the school day. There are also arenas which are created bureaucratically, such as task forces, focus groups or think tanks, with the specific purpose of controlling the selection of participants and defining agendas. Bodies such as these give the appearance of democracy and consultation often without actually being invested with any power to decide on their own composition, what may and what may not be discussed, or on the kinds of recommendations which can be made.

Arenas, like places, may also be created by **events** – or suddenly emerge out of situations. An example comes to mind of the occupation of a nursery school by parents and members of the local community in South Oxford in the 1970s. Through their actions the protesters created or transformed a place (the nursery school) into an arena for political debate and struggle. This transformation involved the emergence of new, if transient, democratic and political practices and discourses in which those involved deployed the language of struggle – that of values, commitment, roles and discipline. The notion of arenas, then, is associated with the processes and discourses of policy making. Of course, different sites – or places – are always characterized by particular discourses and ways of talking, but these are not necessarily connected with making policy though they may well be essential in maintaining existing policies and power relations.

The notion of the **state**, in the context of these chapters, refers to structures and apparatuses (institutions of government such as parliament and local councils, and structures through which government policies are disseminated such as schools, job centres, benefits offices, social services offices, hospital trusts) as well as the processes, practices and discourses which both inform and reflect the management of power relations in society. But the state is located in the world, and operates and is operated on, in complex and less visible ways than might be suggested by listing its offices and practices. Whitty argues that:

...current changes in education policy are themselves linked to a redefinition of the nature of the state and a reworking of the relations between state and civil society. (Whitty, 2002, p. 86)

...as education appears to be devolved from the state to an increasingly marketised civil society, consumer rights will prevail over citizen's rights. This will reduce the opportunities for democratic debate and collective action. (Whitty, 2002, p. 87)

Later, in Chapter 7 some examples of policy making processes are explored in which democratic debate becomes sidelined and fragmented through the orchestration of 'consultation' procedures and the more powerful claims – in terms of their effectiveness – of economic rationality and market forces working through the education system.

The state is not one thing, but many, and it is constantly changing. In England the move away from the kind of welfare state which followed the Second World War and the Beveridge Report, has ushered in a state which is overtly committed to a market culture (Harris, 2003), in which the old state machinery and its servants have been replaced by a slicker market driven version of policy making and implementation and in which 'democracy' has been rationalised to serve the needs of efficiency. This affects the ways in which individuals and communities are involved in policy making and the ways in which the state is managed. As Gewirtz explains:

In the **post-welfarist** era the formal commitments to Keynesian economics and distributive justice were dropped and replaced by formal commitments to market 'democracy' and competitive individualism. Key welfarist orthodoxies were challenged, in particular the view that welfare was best provided within bureaucratic organisational formations. Now welfare bureaucrats and professionals were held to be the source of major problems rather than the source of solutions. (Gewirtz, 2002, p. 2–3)

Welfare rights have become reinterpreted as being linked to notions of deservingness as measured by social usefulness and participation in productivity (Armstrong, 2002), rather than being founded on a commitment to a shared social project of welfare for all. 'Social' areas such as crime, health and housing have been partially privatized as a means of increasing efficiency and decreasing government expenditure as well as undermining the foundations of welfarism as an ideology and as a financial responsibility of government.



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