



Enacting Parental Engagement: Policy Work in a Primary School Setting

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Received: 18 May 2021 / Accepted: 10 October 2021 / Published online: 16 October 2021
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Abstract

Parental engagement is a common theme of education policy in most countries. In Aotearoa New Zealand, policies frame parental engagement in broad terms giving schools flexibility in enacting them. However, the generality assumes the complex and differentiated activities associated with parental engagement are well understood, leaving schools with little guidance for this work. This article examines the enactment of parental engagement in one New Zealand primary school to understand these activities better and provide a basis for improved policy. It partly draws on Ball et al. (Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203153185>, 2012) policy enactment framework identifying several enactment roles associated with parental engagement, particularly in-school ‘narrators’ who are pivotal actors in articulating a rationale for engagement. Key findings were that teachers interpreted parental engagement differently, leading to differentiated practice, and parents are identified as important policy actors. The article concludes that there is a strong case for greater clarity in policy on parental engagement.

Keywords Parental engagement · Teachers · Policy actors · Policy enactment · Primary schooling · Education

Introduction

It is a central belief in the education systems of many countries that teachers will engage with parents. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the role of parents in the education of their children into a sharper focus (OECD, 2020; Winthrop, 2020). The pandemic has revealed vastly different realities for parents supporting learning in the home, making parental engagement a pivotal policy concern for student achievement in our times. Yet what parental engagement policy and practice seeks and how it is enacted is by no means obvious, nor has it been

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widely-researched; for two rare examples, see Epstein and Sheldon (2016); and Saltmarsh (2014). These articles examine policy enactment and parental engagement in the United States and Australia using alternative analytical approaches. Other related studies variously examine context, aspects of parental engagement, and policy implementation in different ways, including Haworth et al. (2015) on pedagogical dispersal, and in this journal, contextualised policy implementation by Gordon (1994). This article extends the scholarship on the policy enactment of parental engagement by applying the framework of Ball et al. (2012) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Further, it provides insights into the role parents might play in this enactment process.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the expectation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) published by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2007) is that teachers will work closely with the parents and whānau (extended family) of their students. It states that the principle of parent, whānau, and community support of students must be considered in the planning, prioritising, and review of the curriculum as it is applied within a school (MoE, 2007, p. 9). The commitment to engagement is also specified in the recently revised professional code and standards for teachers (ECANZ (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand), 2017b). Meanwhile, researchers have concluded that as parents are all different, the policies guiding parent engagement must be broad enough to accommodate various forms of engagement (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012).

Having generalised policy statements allows for more responsiveness at an individual school level, but lack of specificity means a lack of clarity about what is expected of schools and teachers. The process of policy enactment is rarely as straightforward as implied in government rhetoric or policy statements either. There is, therefore, a need to examine more critically the way schools and teachers enact parental engagement policy. Doing so can provide a better understanding of how the goals of parental engagement might be achieved, thus assisting future policy development and practice. Ball and colleagues' (2012) framework on policy enactment, discussed later, provides a way to examine how policy work is undertaken and by whom, and this article adds a further nuance to the policy enactment framework.

This article draws on a New Zealand policy enactment case study which asks: What does policy expect of schools in relation to parental and community engagement, and how is that understood by schools, teachers, and parents? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff ($n = 13$) of a single bounded English-medium state primary school, identified here as Korimako School. Selection of the case school was purposive and chosen to be relatively typical in representation of a New Zealand primary school by nature of: authority (state-not integrated), gender (co-educational), decile (within 4–7), and location (urban). The interview transcripts and collected artefacts have been analysed against the policy work typologies identified by Ball et al., (2012, p. 49). The research at Korimako School reveals the translation of parental engagement policy is not only undertaken by teachers and leaders within schools, but that parents are also policy actors contributing to that work. Indeed parents and governors can be seen not only as 'outsider' actors in the way that Ball et al. (2012) saw them in the English context, but as policy actors operating from 'within' the school space, as 'insiders' (in a similar way to which staff might be considered).

Further, I argue that disparity of practice and outcomes results from broad and often disparate policy wording, and the collective and individual meaning-making undertaken by teachers at levels beneath the policy actor roles discussed by Ball and colleagues. As a result, common outcomes and coherence between policy and practice can be difficult to achieve.

The study of policy enactment considers the diverse environments policy enters and how its interpretation, translation, implementation, and effect is contingent on material, interpretive, and discursive factors (Ball et al., 2012). While the three factors are interwoven, this article primarily examines the interpretive process of translation of policy, whereby human interpretation is central in the making of meaning (Yanow, 2000). In policy enactment, meaning-making occurs in part through the interpretation and translation of policy into practice; it is ‘policy work’ undertaken by ‘policy actors’. *Interpretation* is the initial reading of the policy and the process of its explanation to teachers—in the school setting—establishing a framework for practice. This interpretation is undertaken by a policy actor(s), such as a school leader or designated staff members. Further policy work, which may involve a range of staff members (or policy actors), is involved in translating the policy interpretation into practice. Interpretation is situated within the contextual dimensions of the school and draws on what Ball and colleagues (2012) refer to as situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts, and external contexts (p. 21). This situated-ness determines that the interpretation of policy is individual to each school and potentially the departments and teachers within (Ball et al., 2011, p. 636).

Translation is the process of developing institutionally-based policy texts before putting them into practice, the literal ‘enactment’ of policy (Ball et al., 2012). This policy work, undertaken by policy actors, occurs in numerous ways, from conversation, meetings, and events, to formal procedures and classroom observations. Significantly, policy translation occurs through both “staged events and processes” and “mundane exchanges”, so it is that “policies ‘drip’, ‘seep’ and ‘trickledown’ into classroom practice to become part of the bricolage of teaching and learning activities, sedimented upon or displacing previous translation effects” (pp. 45–46).

Thus, enactment (interpretation and translation) of policy on parental engagement, such as the NZC principle of engagement, is contextually based and involves various policy actors undertaking an array of policy work.

Broad National Policy Settings on Parental Engagement

Parental engagement can be broadly defined as “parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children” (Jeynes, 2005, p. 245). The activities comprising that participation can vary by policy requirements, age of the child, school context and policy, and the interest and experience of both teacher and parent. Both involvement and engagement have been used to describe parent participation, frequently interchangeably; however, greater differentiation is drawn between the two terms by some scholars. For example, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) differentiate the terms using a continuum: (1) parental involvement in schools; (2) parental involvement in schooling; (3) parental engagement in learning. The stages

in the continuum differentiate by the purpose of the activities (on schools, schooling, or learning) and the location of agency (involvement has greater school agency and engagement greater parent agency). Further, Jeynes (2010) identifies subtle aspects of parental engagement, such as having high expectations of children's learning, as having the most powerful impact on academic outcomes.

Policy for parental engagement within Aotearoa New Zealand primary schools has developed over recent decades through various documents and initiatives. Policy emphasis on parental engagement has also developed as research examining its value grew (Biddulph et al., 2003; Boronovi & Montt, 2012; Brooking, 2007; in particular, see Bull et al., 2008; ERO (Education Review Office) 2008a; Hattie, 2009). Starting with a schooling strategy, the government emphasised schools working with families and whānau to enhance children's learning (MoE, 2005, pp. 27–34). This emphasis continues through the 'Community Engagement' principle in the *NZ Curriculum* (MoE, 2007, 2010, 2015a), along with the *National Education Goals*, which recognise "parents in their vital role as their children's first teachers" (MoE, 2015b). Also, the *National Administration Guidelines* and the *Education Standards Act 2001* require consulting with and reporting to parents and the school community on various matters, including students' achievement (Education Standards Act 2001; Minister of Education, 2017). In addition, National Administration Guideline 2 requires every school to have a strategic plan detailing how the school will give effect to policy, including the *NZ Curriculum* (Minister of Education, 2017); the Education Review Office (ERO) monitors this. These policies supplement a well-established policy of parental engagement in administration and decision-making through school Boards of Trustees (BOTs) (Education Act, 1989). Parents are the primary members of BOTs, forming part of a self-managing school model developed during the 1980s.

As stated, schools' actual parental engagement activities vary, and policy does not typically make explicit statements about *how* parental engagement should occur. Nevertheless, guidance on the topic for schools is readily supplied by the Ministry of Education, and other agencies, revealing the government's expectations of schools and teachers. For example, the *NZC* broad policy statement concerning parental engagement is: "The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau, and communities" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Guidance about how schools might enact this from *NZC Online* highlights the definition for engagement given by ERO (see below) and its emphasis on *partnership*, stating "The community engagement principle calls for schools to build productive partnerships with each family to engage their support and ensure that teaching and learning meets the needs, interests, and talents of their children" (MoE, 2020a). A suite of tools, examples, and resources guide schools in determining how this might be applied in their context (MoE, 2015a, 2020a).

Another prominent source of policy guidance to schools, ERO, produced a series of evaluation reports addressing parental engagement (ERO, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Engagement is defined here as "a meaningful, respectful partnership between schools and their parents, whānau, and communities that focuses on improving the educational experiences and successes for each child" (ERO, 2008a, p. 1). This definition elaborates on the *NZC* principle of engagement to specify a particular type

of *support* (educationally focused) through the medium of *partnership*. Further, ERO identifies six critical factors for successful engagement: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication (ERO, 2008a). The examples and discussion accompanying these factors provide further detail on *how* schools might enact parental engagement policy.

A final example of policy and expectations is the teaching code of ‘professional responsibility’ and standards for teaching. The code and standards both emphasise a commitment to parents and whānau through their engagement in collaborative learning-focussed relationships (ECANZ, 2017b). Supplementary guidance proposes this might occur if teachers are “using effective approaches to communicate with families and whānau about their child’s learning, aspirations and progress” (ECANZ, 2017a, p. 19). This would require schools to have in place, for example, policies and/or processes facilitating teacher–parent communication in ways accessible to their community, appropriate monitoring and assessment of learning, and processes to capture student aspirations.

This policy context frames and informs notions of what parental engagement should be. Despite this, and the more detailed guidance offered in support of policy statements, the intention is that schools develop context-specific responses in the enactment of policy. The following section examines the school-specific context and the institutional policy setting influencing policy enactment at Korimako School.

Policies on Parental Engagement at the Local Level: Korimako School

Korimako School is a mid-to-large-sized, English-medium, Year 0–8 state primary school. It has a culturally diverse urban community, with approximately one-quarter of the students identifying as Māori, a further quarter is made up with a combination of ethnicities (particularly Asian). The remaining half of the student roll are NZ European (also known as Pākehā). Additionally, more than ten percent of students are native speakers of other languages. In addition to being culturally diverse, the parent community comes from a breadth of socio-economic backgrounds occupying both working-class and professional occupations. The school campus features a mix of buildings from different eras and is located in a busy urban setting with proximity to business districts. These situated (e.g., school intakes and histories) and material (e.g., buildings and infrastructure) contexts (for more on context, see Ball et al., 2012, p. 21) influence policy enactment, including the development of an institutional narrative.

The institutional policy setting for Korimako School is captured within what Ball and colleagues (2012, p. 51) describe as an *institutional narrative* or what is known in leadership literature as an organisational vision (Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010). The institutional narrative might articulate an “improvement plot” (how the school aims to improve what it is doing) and a narrative about the sort of school ‘we’ want to be (Ball et al., 2012, p. 51). Korimako School presents an institutional narrative around belonging and openness, built through quality relationships founded on shared values. This narrative is represented, in part, by a vision statement contained in the school charter which states school “values will

be integrated into all aspects of school life—social, academic & cultural”. But it is more than that; the institutional narrative represents ‘how things are done around here’ and seeks to engender commitment and generate enthusiasm for the narrative—this is a kind of institutional storytelling (Boje, 2008). This narrative is evident on the school website, where the home page articulates the “open-door policy” and the “restorative” approach to “quality” relationships between staff, parents, and students. The school values are *Ako* (learning together), *Kaitiakitanga* (environmental guardianship), *Manaakitanga* (caring for each other), *Rangatiratanga* (giving our best), and *Whanaungatanga* (respecting each other). These values align with the restorative approach whereby relationships are strengthened through “openness and care” so that in situations where damage is done to those relationships, “restoration can be achieved through involvement, dialogue and consideration for and by all involved” (Restorative Schools, 2009, para.2).

David (deputy principal) described how central the restorative approach was to relationships and how it connected to the school values.

The one thing that sets us apart is how rigorously we apply the restorative behaviour framework... and it goes back to... teachers saying positive things about kids... [The teachers] celebrate success in the values in their classrooms [and]... if the principal’s award is given out in assembly it’s given out for one of the values... Then when we have the restorative conversations, we go back to them as the context for that conversation, ‘which of the five values are not present in this interaction?’

A significant and complementary part of the institutional narrative is the ‘open-door’ policy, which also relates to developing in parents a sense of belonging or connection with the school and of valuing the community. The principal, Peter, describes this in several ways:

I’m obviously always available for meetings, board meetings etc. because that’s part of the job, but... [also] by making sure that two or three times a week I go out and walk up and down the decks at the end... or the start of the day and just say hello to people. Most people, I think, know that they’re welcome to drop by. So in the newsletter, I’ll always say, ‘if you want to know more, drop by’.

What is important [is] just that respect and valuing rather than necessarily *doing* something... but those are the things you can’t ‘legislate’, you can’t command [for parents and the community to trust the school or feel a sense of belonging].

This institutional narrative is the setting for the *policy narrative* on parental engagement. The policy narrative is a way to “cohere policy and school” through a “principle of integration” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 52) and is for wide consumption, including by staff, parents, and students. The purpose of the policy narrative is meaning-making; it interprets potentially disparate and fragmented national policy and produces a coherent articulation of that policy for the school context.

According to the typology of Ball et al. (2012), this policy work is primarily undertaken by policy actors they term ‘narrators’ (see forthcoming section).

The parental engagement policy narrative at Korimako School demonstrates some coherence with both the institutional narrative and national policy. It also draws on the characteristics of the parent community identified and discussed by Peter: some parents have had negative experiences of schools and teachers, “for them, who probably don’t like schools, probably don’t like principals” having positive, ‘low-key’ interactions is essential. Parents’ socio-cultural diversity requires the school to account for parents’ varying interests, expectations, and capacity: “different people, different parents, the engagement is a different thing”. Finally, parents have many commitments. “People are really busy; they’re a lot busier than they were a generation ago... It’s hard to make a living, most of them are working, so it’s harder for a lot of them to engage with us... If you’re dropping your kid off here all day, going to before school care and after school care, we might not see those parents”.

Overall, the Korimako policy narrative articulates robust reporting based on what is helpful for parents; an open-door policy for parents; building relationships based on regular, positive, communication; and valuing what parents have to offer the school. The narrative covers both formal and informal aspects of parental engagement.

Formal aspects of the policy narrative on parental engagement include invitations to parents to come into the school or be recipients of set reporting and communication. The manner of reporting, and some required communication, is outlined in documents such as the school charter, which states, for example, that parents will receive two written reports and two parent interviews during the year, with ePortfolios also being provided to those with students in years five to eight. A draft policy provided further detail of expectations for teachers, such as regular upload of learning to Seesaw, a digital platform for communication with parents. The work was expected to be dated and labelled with the curriculum area/s for reporting purposes, and feedback/feedforward provided for all work. Another policy was about an ‘open door’, with teachers communicating informally with parents/whānau.

Informal aspects of the policy narrative are consistently raised in the interviews with staff. They include the open-door policy, positive phone calls with parents to build capital, and drawing on parent skills and talents. However, the ‘open-door policy’ mentioned above is the most strongly expressed aspect of the policy narrative at Korimako School and is consistent with the institutional narrative:

As a school we do have an open-door policy ...and I like to think that parents do feel they can come in... We say open-door policy [not] mean[ing] they can just come in, but we do have [an environment that] I kind of feel like it’s quite welcoming and doesn’t really restrict parental engagement. (Sam, teacher)

A further aspect of the policy narrative on parental engagement is in the nature of communication with parents. The principal, Peter, clearly articulates recognition of communication as a basis for the home-school relationship and the need for this to be positive:

[We need to be] following through on good things as well, man, you can build some capital by doing that... The [deputy principal] for example, promotes... that everyone should... contact a parent, [about] something positive once a week... If you're only dealing in the negative all the time, then it becomes a negative, and if they're going to hear from me, or... one of the deputy principals... they're going to think it's a bad thing, but if they realise it doesn't have to be... I mean, if you ring them up to tell them something good about their children, you're building good relationships, good engagement and that even makes it easier when you have to do the other as well, because you... know who they are a bit more.

In addition, many staff expressed an aspect of the policy narrative where parents were valued for sharing their skills, knowledge or culture with the school. For example, teachers invited parents into the classroom to lead activities or share information, with Greg stating, “we're all pretty good at... finding parents with special skills and utilising those”.

The policy narrative is the contextualised meaning of policy created through policy work undertaken by policy actors, in this case, the staff of Korimako School.

Policy Enactment Roles in Parental Engagement: An Analytical Framework

The ‘policy work’ of teachers in interpreting and translating government education policy is messy and dynamic and influenced by a range of factors, including, for example, the different professional roles the teacher may hold and their expertise. While Ball et al., (2012, p. 49) caution against the “seductive neatness of typologies”, it is helpful to consider the variation of policy work undertaken to dispel any inclination to believe that teachers have a uniform response to policy, even within the same school. Ball and colleagues (2012, p. 49) outline eight types of policy actors (and their policy work) that teachers may undertake:

- Narrators (interpretation, selection, and enforcement of meanings);
- Entrepreneurs (advocacy, creativity, and integration);
- Outsiders (entrepreneurship, partnership, and monitoring);
- Transactors (accounting, reporting, monitoring/supporting, facilitating);
- Enthusiasts (investment, creativity, satisfaction, and career);
- Translators (production of texts, artifacts, and events);
- Critics (union representatives: monitoring of management, maintaining counter-discourses);
- Receivers (coping, defending, and dependency)

These types of policy actors and policy work are not bounded, as teachers and school leaders may take up a variety of policy work at different stages or in the capacity of various roles within the school.

Enacting Parental Engagement at Korimako School

Narrators

Narrators interpret policy through filters formed by the constraining and enabling factors of the school. Through the process of selecting and shaping aspects of policy, the narrator creates an institution-level policy narrative, which must be both acceptable and achievable (Ball et al., 2012). This narrative is aimed at the staff of the school, parents, and other stakeholders, e.g., the Education Review Office and wider school community. School leaders are in a natural position to take on the policy work of narrators. Further, ensuring effective policies and practices for parent involvement and effective parent-teacher relationships can be seen as a key leadership responsibility (Robinson et al., 2005, p. 169).

The Korimako School principal saw himself as a “broker” “between government policy, the board... the staff, the parents and the kids”. Through Peter identified as ‘brokerage’, the policy work of a narrator can be recognised. Using an example of enacting the National Standards policy reporting requirements (Minister of Education, 2009; MoE, 2009), the principal described how he developed what can be identified as a policy narrative. This narrative was informed by understanding and balancing the different expectations of the ‘political perspective’, or policy rhetoric, and the relevant school stakeholders—parents, board of trustees (BOT), and staff. Peter did this by being informed by relevant research, acknowledging the needs and wants of the school community (including the BOT), and understanding the capacity and expectations of the staff.

The narrator interprets policy and describes what must be done within the school. Then, using various mechanisms, the Korimako principal articulates these expectations to staff, perhaps at a staff meeting or (merging with the work of a translator) through a school plan or policy document (possibly in draft form for finalising after input and feedback). Peter also utilises the senior leadership team and other key staff to reinforce the policy narrative. Mentor teachers are also helpful for guiding and modelling desired practice (see Translators).

Aotearoa New Zealand research shows principals and board members generally believe that the board’s contribution is to the school’s strategic direction (Stevens & Wylie, 2017); therefore, it is the policy work of the narrator that governors are perhaps the most likely to perform. Some studies show parental influence on policy is minimal (Addi-Racah, 2020; Munn, 1998) and that boards are likely to follow the lead of the principal (Munn, 1998). However, the likelihood of policy influence might be stronger where partnership is evident between the principal and board, particularly the chairperson, as it was at Korimako School. The principal referred to the contribution of the board chairperson as a valued decision-maker and direction-influencer several times. Peter noted, for example, that the chairperson had instigated the focus on ‘plain English’, jargon-free communication with parents.

Interpreting and explaining policy is an aspect of policy work undertaken by policy narrators, and their narrative is often shared beyond the school staff. For

example, the principal may translate a policy specifically for the parent community, providing an institutional position on, or interpretation of, policy for parents and the school community.

Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs fulfil the role of policy advocates within the school. Ball et al. (2012) suggest this is not a particularly common policy role, as it only occurs where a staff member has ‘personally invested in and identified with policy ideals and their enactment’ (p. 53). Therefore, this type of policy work is not undertaken in every school, nor for every policy. Entrepreneurs are creative and dynamic to engage others in their work, drawing together and reworking existing and frequently disparate policy fragments and practices into cohesive ‘enactable’ roles and practices. This type of policy work was not apparent for parental engagement at Korimako School.

An entrepreneur for parental engagement might be more likely to occur in a school where parental engagement is a new or renewed priority for a school, as one of the key roles of a policy entrepreneur is to initiate or advocate as “agents of change” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 53). If, as Ball and colleagues suggest, policy entrepreneurs are not commonplace, they are perhaps more likely to result from an unpredictable mix of personality, personal interest, leadership ability, and a parental engagement policy focus; this was not the current situation at Korimako.

Outsiders

Some policy actors are based outside the school environment and may undertake roles that include “introducing or interpreting policies and initiating or supporting translation work” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 55). The advisor, edu-business or consultant from outside the school can play a significant role in policy translation enactment or support. Since reforms in the 1980s, which initiated the removal of permanent government advisory staff, the ‘outsiders’ providing support to schools have increasingly been private actors (Thrupp et al., 2020). From 2017 the Ministry have identified professional learning and development (PLD) priorities that inform the regionally-allocated PLD available from government-funded, authorised and accredited, private organisations and sole traders acting as providers and facilitators (MoE, 2020b, 2020c). (The rise and role of outsiders/private actors in schooling have been heavily critiqued, for a recent analysis see, Thrupp et al. (2021)).

One such facilitator, who was already providing services to the school, was contracted to work with the school regarding the ‘reporting to parents’ requirements of parental engagement. Effectively, the role of the consultant was in supporting policy translation—“the process of accommodating policy to practice” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 55). At Korimako, this entailed working with the parent community to gain their opinions and feedback on the topic ‘reporting to parents’. They were seen, by the board chairperson and principal, as offering a neutral conduit for that information while still being familiar with the school.

Transactors

Ball and colleagues (2012) identify two distinct varieties of transactors. The first is concerned with policy monitoring and enforcement, which frequently involves data collection and reporting, and the second refers to a range of ancillary staff who support, facilitate and, in some cases, interpret policy. While not as transactional as the monitoring occurring for some UK policy, as described by Ball et al. (2012), parental engagement policy *is* monitored in Aotearoa New Zealand, primarily at an individual school level. For example, at Korimako School, the nature and frequency of student achievement reporting are outlined in the school strategic plan. In addition to reporting progress against this to the board, the strategic plan is uploaded to the Ministry portal. The external review agency, ERO, then provides a check through its regular evaluations of schools. Thus, monitoring can make policy visible by ‘evidencing’ policy activity, and for teacher accountability, this also indicates “the policies that count most are those that are counted” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 57). However, in the case of parental engagement policy, while there is some monitoring of the mandated reporting aspects, most teachers at Korimako did not directly identify that activity as an aspect of parental engagement in their definitions.

The ‘support worker’, Ben, at Korimako School, represents the second type of transactor, the policy supportive ancillary staff member. He is an ancillary staff member whose role in supporting students means supporting and engaging with their parents and whānau. Ben often helps facilitate greater parental engagement with the school in general and can assist teaching staff in engaging with parents. Ben notes that a part of the advantage he has in engaging with parents stems from the flexibility of not being tied to a class: “The availability and flexibility... has been very beneficial for some parents and their engagement because otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to”.

Enthusiasts

Teachers who are enthusiasts for some or all of a particular policy exhibit it through their efforts towards its implementation, not necessarily just in their classrooms or areas of responsibility. Aside from the investment of time, energy, and creativity they spend in developing their practice concerning the policy, they represent exemplars or models of the policy in practice and can reveal the policy’s potential to others. Through this policy work, enthusiasts encourage collaborative or collective approaches to policy practice and might be recognised as “policy models” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 59) or “influentials” (Cole & Weiss, 2009). Further, due to their efforts towards policy enactment, enthusiasts are frequently also translators.

Three Korimako teachers demonstrated policy work as enthusiasts for parental engagement, particularly through their efforts in championing one aspect of that policy, sharing student learning with parents—sometimes linked to reporting to parents. These teachers endorsed using the digital platform, Seesaw, to improve how teachers shared student work and classroom happenings with parents. As advocates

for this platform (one was also the school administrator for the platform), they were ‘influentials’ who encouraged this method of parent-teacher communication and modelled its application. Their enthusiasm for this particular approach to parental engagement was clearly expressed, with one claiming, “I might be the biggest advocate; I think I could sell [Seesaw]”.

Parents might also undertake the policy work of enthusiasts (or translators), as in the following school-home communication example, using Facebook. One parent, Michelle, significantly changed how parents accessed information about happenings at Korimako School. Michelle said frustration at finding relevant information about what was occurring at school led her to utilise Facebook to get relevant information out to parents. Another parent shared that there had been ‘mumbling’ amongst parents about the inadequacy of the website as a source of information on current happenings and felt the Facebook page was working well. Michelle managed expectations, modelled how communication could work, and built trust with the staff to manage information by being visible in the school, “so [the teachers got] to know me, and trust [me], and see whether they could approach me”. The policy work undertaken by Michelle was in making enactment a “collective process”, whereby a particular aspect of parental engagement policy was “translated into action” (Ball et al., 2012).

Translators

The translators undertake the policy work producing texts, artefacts, and events in the translation of the policy text to practice, thus “animating” the policy for others by making it “meaningful and doable” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 60). One example of this is evident in the mentor teacher and provisionally-registered teacher relationship. For policy like parental engagement, which is broad in description and typically not addressed directly in initial teacher training (as is often the case in NZ), the role of the mentor teacher in translating policy to practice can be significant. Their role is a central (but not sole) aspect of the induction and mentoring programme guiding provisionally-registered teachers (ECANZ, 2015).

Another example of policy translation is creating institutional texts, events or processes, which draw other staff into active policy enactment. Senior leaders typically create these. For parental engagement at Korimako School these included a form for seeking information from parents before ‘goal-setting conferences’, the school report template, and a draft policy (below) outlining how teachers should conduct the various aspects of reporting student achievement progress to parents:

- Regular upload of learning to Seesaw (most weeks), work needs to be dated and labelled with the curriculum area/s for reporting purposes, feedback—feedforward provided for all work
- No cutting and pasting of report comments—unprofessional and parents know
- Comments to be written from a positivist approach
- Open Door Policy—teachers communicating informally with parents/whānau
- Celebrating of Learning will be linked to teacher appraisal.

These institutional texts and processes assist in guiding teachers in *how* certain aspects of parental engagement will occur in the school.

Critics

Under this type of policy work, the “everyday mutterings” and criticisms that teachers might make are contrasted with “principled and political critique” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 61). For example, the more considered and directed criticism toward a particular policy from union representatives can contribute to policy interpretation and enactment. This type of critique mainly occurs at moments of significance, such as when there is a perceived threat to that union’s members (p. 61), such as the introduction of the National Standards policy in Aotearoa New Zealand. Union representatives within a school might meet directly with senior leaders to negotiate interpreting policy more in line with union interpretation or provide texts, artefacts or events to aid with enactment. Critics also help maintain counter-discourses or alternative ways of considering current policy rhetoric, potentially drawing on collective professional memory or historical archive to challenge or critique policy.

Notwithstanding evidence of some ‘everyday mutterings’ about aspects of parental engagement by one or two Korimako teachers, they were generally an expression of a misalignment of a teacher’s values and expectations with policy in practice. No demand for change in policy processes or expectations within the school was evident as stemming from these ‘mutterings’. Nor did Ball et al. (2012) find translation of this type of ‘discontent’—including the, at times, even greater expression of discontent through demonstration or industrial action—into “the more immediate demands of and processes of policy at school” (p. 63).

Receivers

Receivers are frequently, but not always, provisionally registered or early-career teachers who accept, and depend on, the guidance and direction offered by the translators of policy. The policy can be seen as ‘must do’ (Smith et al., 2019) and at times oppressive, particularly where there is no understanding of the context or history of the work. In the realities of everyday teaching work, policy can seem distant to immediate concerns, with Ball et al. (2012) identifying the “copers” as those who manage while terming the strugglers as “defenders”—where “short-term survival is the main concern” (p. 63).

At Korimako School, some early-career teachers expressed limited understanding of parental engagement policy origins and purpose. Responding to a question about what Ministry expectations are for parental engagement, two such teachers, Ashleigh and Greg, said they did not know what those expectations were. Ashleigh went on to say, ‘we’ve never ever really been told’. Both of these teachers were clearer about what the school expected of them; that is, the processes and actions of the class and school (and the institutional narrative) dominated their understanding of parental engagement policy. Further comments by Ashleigh indicated she was at

times struggling with or felt oppressed by the practice of what she viewed as this policy:

It seems like [the principal] really appreciates parent engagement and feedback, but he almost takes their feedback or... input over ours. ...Sometimes parents just think they have the upper hand over us.

Discussion

The Need for Clear and Coherent Parental Engagement Policy

The Ball et al. (2012) typology has helped reveal the role of teachers and parents as policy actors, the pivotal role of narration in making sense of school obligations around parental engagement, and it has drawn attention to matters of coherence within the policy enactment process. A school policy narrative can exhibit coherence with government policy in some or all aspects or develop in an entirely distinct way as the narrator mediates what policy expects with what they believe the school can deliver. Achieving policy coherence is a “dynamic process” whereby policy actors “craft or continually negotiate the fit between external demands and schools’ own goals and strategies” (Honig & Hatch, 2004, abstract). Consideration of coherence reveals what policy texts, and the localised interpretation of them through the narration process, legitimise as solutions for the policy ‘problem’ of parental engagement. Further, the differentiated practice of teachers, given their scope to interpret and apply engagement policy on their own terms, was revealed as they attempted to make sense of these directives.

Parental engagement policy is disparate and broadly defined within the decentralised Aotearoa New Zealand system of self-managing schools, providing much potential for localised responses, as seen with Korimako’s ‘open-door’ policy. A broadly articulated parental engagement policy leads to more locally variable practices—and outcomes—with schools and, ultimately, teachers having considerable freedom in the enactment process. The value of broad policy wording is dependent on the nature of the policy and the context within which it exists. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is a decentralised system of self-managing schools with high degrees of latitude concerning governance and management, and curriculum and programme delivery (Wylie, 2012). Broadly articulated policy in this system might generate positive consequences, giving scope for schools to respond to their local contexts, or negative consequences, where the ability for some schools to successfully enact policy is constrained by the resources available to them and their community (Wylie, 2020).

The analysis also demonstrates that the what, why, and how of parental engagement are scattered across a range of policy documents. This fragmentation means the purpose and goals of parental engagement and how they are to be achieved are difficult to identify, detracting from the ability of schools to understand and interpret their responsibilities. When fragmentation is combined with the broad definition of parental engagement and applied within a self-managing school system, clarity is

challenged. A policy with a clearly articulated—not simply implied—purpose could assist in aligning outcomes more successfully while retaining the agency and creativity of policy actors in schools.

Given the lack of a single coherent policy statement, what does the analysis of parental engagement in Korimako School reveal of the *what*, *why*, and *how* of the parental engagement? Outside of mandated reporting and governance requirements, the school is required to follow government policy, which asks that:

- “The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau, and communities” *NZC* (MoE, 2007, p. 9)—addressing *what* is sought
- Engagement is “a meaningful, respectful partnership between schools and their parents, whānau, and communities that focuses on improving the educational experiences and successes for each child” Evaluation report on parental engagement, *Partners in learning: Good practice* (ERO, 2008a, p. 1)—*what* and *why*
- Six critical factors for successful engagement: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication (ERO, 2008a)—*how*
- “The community engagement principle calls for schools to build productive partnerships with each family to engage their support and ensure that teaching and learning meets the needs, interests, and talents of their children” *NZC Online* (MoE, 2020a)—*what* and (partial) *why*

What then do narrators and practitioners identify as ‘the’ policy on parental engagement? In this instance it is likely the core policy document for non-mandated parental engagement is the *NZ Curriculum*, which every teacher has. However, this policy document not only fails to mention parents (despite being the significant focus of most accompanying guidance) but does not articulate a purpose for the ‘engaged support’ to be provided. This further emphasises the importance of the narrator—both in the scope of their knowledge of policy commentary on parental engagement, and their ability to cohere a narrative from fragmented and disparate sources. At Korimako, the principal, Peter, produced a strong policy narrative for parental engagement. As an experienced principal, who had already worked at the school for approximately a decade, Peter practised a narrator’s policy work. The senior leadership team, which had also been in place for some time, supported that work. Other schools, with leaders less experienced or familiar with their staff and community, may find this aspect of the policy work more challenging.

Understanding or developing a purpose (or the ‘*why*’) within a policy narrative is part of meaning-making necessary for practice. The practice of an open-door policy, for example, differs depending on why you practice it. A teacher who understands it as building relationship capital between themselves and parents (per a restorative approach) might come out of the classroom with students at the end of the day to say hello to parents and engage in conversation. Another, understanding it as parents having a right to come into the school and classroom or make contact with teaching staff, installs a ‘welcome’ sign on the door and shares their contact details. While the case study and particulars provided in some policy guidance (e.g., MoE, 2013)

unpack the concept of an open-door policy further, narrators may fail to recognise this as a policy source or may make a ‘surface’ interpretation. A surface interpretation may demonstrate a degree of coherence (between government and localised narratives) but may also simplify the policy narrative and hide other, possibly richer, engagement practices. For example, the open-door policy understood in simplistic terms might obscure the positive capital building (e.g., outreach to families) that goes on. What is clear is that in the process between policy and action, policy continues to be *made* (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 8); as such, the meaning-making being undertaken in schools needs closer attention.

Teachers and Parents as Policy Actors

Ball and colleagues state “the school is not always sensible as the unit of analysis for policy research”, and what is meant by “the school” “is typically partial and neglectful” (2012, p. 69). They refer, in part, to the additional translations of policy taking place within departments or year levels and within classrooms, as well as the aspects of schools that are not always acknowledged (e.g., the influence of ‘outsiders’ or context on school operations)—something illustrated in the analysis of Korimako School. Every teacher is a policy actor (or what Lipsky (2010) refers to as a street-level bureaucrat) undertaking a subsequent level of meaning-making as they enact policy into practice. The policy work typology offers some insights into the policy work undertaken by teachers and how they might respond to policy at an individual or department level.

Further, the analysis helped identify parents and governors as policy actors operating from ‘within’ the school space, in the way of ‘insiders’ (as staff might be considered). This contrasts with the ‘outsider’ actors of Ball and colleagues’ typology (2012). Parents’ contribution to policy work might occur more readily if a participatory or partnership approach is utilised, but it will also depend on the socio-cultural context of the school. At Korimako School, there were many invitations for parents to engage with the school in various ways. The principal, Peter, was instrumental in this, issuing invitations and responding positively to approaches by parents. While this provided opportunity for parents with the cultural capital to engage, like Michelle, not all parents within the community would contemplate doing so. However, if schools express problems or needs more explicitly to parents, thus allowing the opportunity to “jointly develop an agreed approach and practices” (Brooking, 2007, p. 16), more parents may engage with policy work. There are existing opportunities for this through boards of trustees’ policy review processes with parent communities.

Analysis using the typology highlights how a diverse range of school-based actors might enact policy. When all actors have the opportunity to engage with policy, the more chances there are for context-responsive interpretation and translation to occur. This does not necessarily achieve policy coherence, but there may be increased coherence in meaning-making. Coherent meaning-making could drive greater collective understanding and commitment to the purpose or object of the policy narrative whilst not constraining the creative agency of teachers and context-appropriate

translation to practice. That being the case, understanding and utilising the typology might allow principals, as key mediators of policy (Thomson, 2002), to create conditions through which the policy narrative is translated into practice to serve the school and its aims best. In addition, the typology illustrates how policy actors can undertake work on *part* of a policy; therefore, individual or departmental interests or skills could be successfully drawn on by the principal/narrator for different aspects of policy translation.

Developing Parental Engagement Policy using a Participatory Approach

The discussion highlights the need for clear and coherent policy and policy enactment in parental engagement. The role and impact of teachers and parents as diverse policy actors in policy enactment is also emphasised. Through an improved understanding of the policy enactment process and its participating actors, these findings suggest that the use of a participatory policy development approach would suit a decentralised system such as Aotearoa New Zealand's. A participatory approach could develop a common, clearly articulated policy purpose for parental engagement through a coalition of actors (Wagenaar, 2015), of which parents and BOTs (or their association) could be key participants. Where there is a common purpose, coherence is brought to the work of policymakers and teachers. As Wylie (2012, p. 16) identified, the value of this type of coherence is as one of six principles for testing the “soundness of the infrastructure built by... educational policy”. Further, common purpose does not necessarily restrict localised responses; there can be various ways of arriving at the same outcome.

Given the critical role of principals in the interpretation of policy, the policy work of school governors and parents, and, importantly, the role of *every* teacher in the translation of policy to practice, it would serve governments well to do everything possible to bring these actors with them when developing education policy. This is not just a matter of offering professional development for a new policy, for example, but providing space and opportunity for these actors to lead or participate in policy development. The dangers of not doing so have been demonstrated in Aotearoa New Zealand, where there has been push back in response to some policy, for example, National Standards, by these actors (e.g., NZEI, 2010; Watson, 2010; Wood, 2009).

Conclusion

There are dual concerns in policy implementation—and enactment—research “*to explain* ‘what happens’ and/or a concern *to affect* ‘what happens’”, with many researchers interested in both (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 2). In this article, Ball and colleagues’ (2012) typology and the case of Korimako School have been used to explain what happens to parental engagement policy as enacted in an Aotearoa New Zealand primary school. What policy expects of schools concerning parental engagement is framed in broad terms across various policy documents. While offering flexibility, the lack of specificity leaves schools and teachers without a coherent

purpose for parental engagement's differentiated and complex activities. The role of the 'narrator' is pivotal in articulating a rationale for parental engagement to staff and the school community through an institutional narrative. Further translation occurs as teachers enact this narrative into practice, resulting in differentiated outcomes to parental engagement. The findings show parents are potentially important policy actors contributing to the interpretation and translation of policy in the school setting. Their involvement contributes to a more participatory approach to policy development.

Given the heightened awareness of the importance of parents in education revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes sense to want to use these findings to help parental engagement policy better serve schools, parents, and students. Policy writers should give attention to how parental engagement policy is articulated. They might encourage actors to consider parental engagement as a policy concern in order to develop a democratic understanding of the issue and what policy could seek to achieve. A fuller understanding and more coherent expression of all elements of a policy will assist in its enactment. Further research is warranted in diverse schools and classrooms, examining how teachers 'make sense' of parental engagement policy texts, individually and collectively.

Just as this one case study does not capture all the ways in which schools enact parental engagement policy, it would be a mistake to think this analysis method reveals *all* the ways in which policy work occurs or is enacted—nor do Ball et al. suggest this. However, speaking of the "policy interpretation genre" where the inclination has been to view policy actors (except school leaders) as equal, they say, "A great deal of the complex and differentiated activity that goes into the 'responses' of schools *to* and their work *with* policy is...obscured and distorted" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 49). Thus, the typology offers a device to help to reveal much more of the policy enactment process, providing a helpful basis for a more nuanced examination of, and a democratic approach to, the enactment of policy into practice.

Acknowledgements The author is grateful to Martin Thrupp and Patrick Barrett for their useful feedback in the preparation of this article.

Funding This work was supported by the University of Waikato under a Doctoral Scholarship.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author reports no potential conflict of interest.

Ethical approval Approved by the University of Waikato, Te Kura Toi Tangata Division of Education Ethics Committee on 14 August 2017, Reference Number FEDU098/16.

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