Equity by Design:

Engaging School Communities in Critical Reflection on Policy

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The daily practices within school communities are mediated by an array of policies. These policies dictate how individuals are expected to present themselves and interact with others in educational settings. They determine who gets access to instructional resources and supports. They set boundaries on the content of instruction and instructional methods. In essence, they are tools that shape the lived experience of administrators, teachers, students, families, and other community members.

As the number of state and national policy mandates in the educational realm continues to multiply, teachers, students, and administrators may feel increasingly overwhelmed as they are required to understand and respond to multiple, sometimes contradictory, policies created by individuals who may or may not share their familiarity with the local context (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010). But, at the local level, the school itself, community members have the opportunity to engage in a democratic process to interpret policy mandates, develop responses, and determine local policy (Heimans, 2012). This brief describes a process by which school communities can engage in *critical examination of and reflection on* the policies that shape and inform their daily practices and thereby ensure that local policy and practice are consistent with the larger goals of the community, including a focus on social justice.

What is Policy?

The bell rings. Paulo has arrived in regulation shirt and shoes, but no belt. Mike slips in the door forty seconds after the bell. Kathleen announces that she has forgotten her homework folder – again. Uniforms, attendance, and homework are just a handful of the arenas in which educators are expected to respond to an authoritative decision-making body's will as it is communicated through policy.

In the school context, the word "policy" tends to evoke thoughts of federal and state mandates or the rules listed in parent handbooks, employee manuals, and board-approved documents. While important, these artifacts do not constitute the whole of policy; policies also include the interpretive and decision-making processes that take place

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Key Terms

Critical Reflection – To engage in critical reflection is to question the logic and/or assumptions underlying particular ideas, arguments, or social constructions. In the context of schools, this type of reflection often leads individuals to question and act on policies that create or maintain unequal power relations among specific groups (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Freire, 1998).

Restorative Justice – Across contexts, restorative principles emphasize repairing harm. In schools, the restorative justice approach is viewed as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions that emphasizes creating safe learning environments through community building and redressing damage (Riestenberg, 2012).

Policy-as-Written – Documents or other formal texts through which policymakers communicate their intent.

Policy-as-Practice – The interpretive and decision-making processes that take place daily in schools and classrooms and result in sets of standards or patterns at a particular site (Sutton & Levinson, 2001).

daily in schools and classrooms and result in sets of standards or patterns at a particular site. Described as *policy-as-practice* (Sutton & Levinson, 2001; see also Heimans, 2012), these patterns may or may not exist in harmony with policymakers' intent because they are the result of interpretations of and responses to *policy-as-written*.

Policy-as-practice also speaks to collective and/or unconscious decisions made every day by members of a school community that have no formal text associated with them. For example, members of the parent teacher association may be given an advantage in the selection of teachers for their children. These practices are often either unacknowledged or backed as "the way we do things here," and their lack of tethering to a written text can make them difficult to identify and challenge.

Critical Reflection on Policy

Policymakers develop responses to emerging needs or concerns based on their own perspective toward social situations and their causes, and because of positions of power, often influence local perceptions of social situations and affect educators' behavior toward students and their families. In a classic example, Sandra Stein (2004) demonstrated that the delineations drawn in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Title's underlying assumptions that poor students were the victims of cultural deprivation resulted in stigmatization and lower expectations of so-called "Title

students," the policy's intended beneficiaries. Without critical reflection, then, local educators and community members may adopt or continue to hold limiting beliefs about particular student groups and their families, and the implementation of specific policies may negatively affect behavior towards specific groups in the school community.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the carrots and sticks used to mold the ideal behavior described in many policies can create inequities as policies are enacted (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). For example, behavioral expectations and their accompanying disciplinary "sticks" have frequently resulted in the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of black and Latino students and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds from schools (Monroe, 2005; Skiba & Sprague, 2008). As a result, many schools are recognizing the cultural nature of behavioral expectations and the damaging result of punitive enforcement mechanisms and turning to restorative justice policies, which offer opportunities for dialogue and productive, collaborative resolutions to problematic situations (Gonzalez, 2011). Reflection on the unequal outcomes of policies prompts members of the school community to remedy such inequities.

How Can Our School Community Be More Intentional About Local Policy?

Research suggests that one of the best ways for schools to respond to and manage the multiple, and sometimes conflicting demands of various policies is through the creation and maintenance of formal decision-making structures to develop goals and strategies for designing and/or implementing policies. Not only will participants in these decision-making bodies be more likely to "own" the outcomes of enacted policies, but they will also be more likely to understand how the problems and solutions that policies address are socially constructed. This understanding opens up the possibility of multiple "frames" through which participants can make sense of the local context (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Developing such a process requires careful attention paid to planning *who, where, what,* and *when;* considerations for each of these are offered below.

Who: Inclusive Stakeholder Teams

Critical reflections on school policies should begin with a diverse team of stakeholders, one that engages individuals who bring unique perspectives on the ways in which policies work in the school setting. *When assembling inclusive stakeholder teams, consider:*

Who will be included on the team?
> Representatives from school leadership and staff, families and students, specialists, school resource officers, alumni, union representatives, and school board members may be included. This team should also be representative in terms of the ethnic, racial, linguistic, economic, ability and gender diversity within the school community. Rather than enlisting the usual parent volunteers and student representatives, consider seeking out those who do not typically volunteer or who seem to be struggling under the current system. Seeing school policies from the points of view of these individuals is likely to provide valuable insights into what is working as well as what needs to change.

How many members will the team have?
> While creating a team with diverse perspectives is important, this priority should be balanced with the need to maintain a workable group size. Additional members may be enlisted to participate on workgroups once action items surface.

Who will facilitate the meetings?
> Keeping in mind that typical facilitation duties are often taken up by or assigned to those with the most decision-making power within an organization, it is important that critical reflection on policy be led by those who may not often have these types of rights and responsibilities, and who will have great insight into the critical questions posed through analysis. Consider enlisting the support of a skilled facilitator from inside the school or the surrounding community to model the facilitation of a critical reflection process, with the goal over time being to transfer facilitation to those who have been historically marginalized in educational settings (e.g. students, family members, instructional assistants, etc.). Alternatively, consider enlisting the support of an outside skilled facilitator, such as one from the Great Lakes Equity Center, with the same goal of transferring this role over time.

# Where: A Space that Facilitates Full Participation

Both the physical and the social environments in which critical reflection takes place should be carefully considered. Team members should feel that they are on equal footing and that they may speak freely without fear of recrimination or retribution. The environment should also provide the necessary tools to facilitate frank and open discussion. *When preparing the physical environment, consider:*

How will the seating be arranged?
> e.g. A round table that allows all members to see one another and has no head

What materials and services will help to facilitate discussion?
> e.g. Technological resources (projectors, laptops), copies of policy documents, school level data, name tags/place cards, assistive technology, language services, childcare
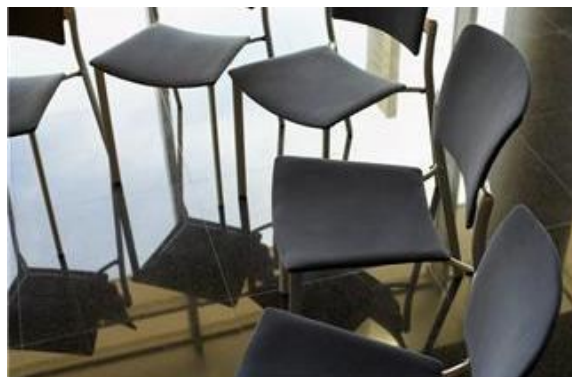
When preparing the social environment, consider:

How will the task at hand be introduced?
> e.g. An outside facilitator will introduce the task, rather than an administrator or powerful figure, so that the work is "owned" by the team and not a single member of the team

What procedures will help to make each person feel comfortable voicing his or her thoughts?
> Remember that procedures for teamwork are culturally determined, and even rules that seem to promote equal opportunities to speak, such as turn taking, can be used to empower some members of the group over others. Being open to different styles of communication and watchful for instances in which voices are silenced will be important. Consider embracing Singleton and Linton's (2006) four agreements for courageous conversations: Stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, expect and accept lack of closure

How will you know if the ground rules are working?
> e.g. Give an anonymous written survey after each session

Stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept lack of closure.

(Singleton & Linton, 2006)

What: Critical Reflection on Policy

Critical reflection requires us to examine both written and unwritten policies. We must question our intentions, assumptions, and the distribution of resources and opportunities.

What policies are in place?

Begin by asking the group to consider current school policies, including both policy-as-written and policy-as-practice. Using an organizer that delineates policy domains and offers space to reflect on the connection (or lack thereof) between the written text of policy and policy-as-practice, such as the one provided in the appendix, can help stimulate discussion.

What is the intent behind this policy?

In the day-to-day, it can be easy to lose sight of *why* particular policies exist. At times, a policy's ill effects or faulty implementation can obscure its benevolent intent. Other times, it may be discovered that a policy that has long been accepted as part of the natural order of things may intend to preserve the power or privilege of a select group. For others, it may be difficult to discern the intent; what was this policy was designed to accomplish? Once clarified, interpretations of a policy's intent can be weighed against the goals of the school community: ***What is it we want to accomplish?***

What social constructions does this policy embrace?

Policies, both as they are written and as they are enacted, offer up a particular take on how the social world works. They construct or reaffirm categories of individuals, defining what it means to be a professional, an English language learner, or an emotionally handicapped student, and prescribing how such individuals relate to one another and what resources they should receive. Because these constructions can become part of how groups and individuals define themselves (Foucault, 1980), it is important to interrogate these delineations: ***Do we agree that this is how the world works?***

Who benefits from the way things are and who does not (Freire, 1998)?

The advantages secured from the maintenance of particular policies may be obvious – such as the receipt of funds for classroom projects or placement in Advanced Placement classes – or more subtle – as when particular students are socially ostracized or when particular parents are excluded from decision-making opportunities. When examining who benefits from specific policies, for some policies, existing data may provide key insights into where inequities lie. For others, data may need to be collected. Be broad-minded in your definition of "data," remembering that qualitative data such as staff, student and parent stories, conversations, open-ended survey questions, and observations can be just as valuable as the quantitative data gleaned from Likert scale surveys and other numerical measures. ***Is this the way that we want things to be?***

What actions will redress the inequities we see in our policies (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010)?

Armed with data and a shared decision to change the status quo, your team is ready to engage in creative problem solving to craft policies with a new intent, alter the constructions of flawed policies, or remedy inequitable policy effects.

When: Meet and Repeat

Critical reflection on policy is never finished; it is an ongoing process that requires an established time and place in the school calendar. Ensuring that these meetings and workgroup sessions are accessible to representatives from all groups within the school community will necessitate careful planning.

Consider these questions as you plan your initial team meetings:

> **Will these efforts be considered part of a teacher's professional development time?**
> **Will childcare be provided to ensure that families with young children can participate?**
> **How will meeting times account for the different work schedules of family and community representatives?**

The larger policy team may also need to be divided into workgroups as action steps become clearer. These groups can establish a plan and tackle the important questions such as, "How will we know when we've accomplished our goal?" Regular reports back to the larger policy team will help to ensure that continuous progress is made.

# What are We Working Toward? Features of Equity-Focused Policies

Delineating a school-based process for reflection and action is vital to the creation and implementation of equity-focused policies that are responsive to the local context. However, there are also features of equity-focused policies that transcend context. Equity-focused policies…

Create Access: Policies should afford all staff and students equal opportunity to maintain or improve well-being.

Educate: A rationale for the policy is made explicit, communicated in ways that make sense within the local context, and includes guidance with examples to facilitate decision-making.

Liberate: Policies should provide opportunities and suitable constraints to allow for decision-making that is most appropriate for specific situations and contexts.

Rely on Research: Policies should be supported by research, including local data and/or evidence.

Center those on the Margins: Policies enumerate specific student groups in order to be responsive to students who have been historically marginalized in school settings.

Provide Accountability Measures: Equity-focused policies specify steps for action by school officials in order to comply with the policies (Kozleski & Skelton, 2007; McLaughlin & Mongeon, 2012).

This list is by no means exhaustive; equity-focused policies should also reflect the collaboratively developed goals of the local community.

Conclusion

Through critical reflection on policy, schools can ensure that they are intentional in their responses to the mandates handed down from governing bodies and that they are aware of the effects of local policies – written and unwritten. By establishing a formal process for policy decision-making that includes multiple perspectives, shared decision-making and collaborative problem solving, education professionals and the communities in which they work can take an important step toward building inclusive and equitable school communities.
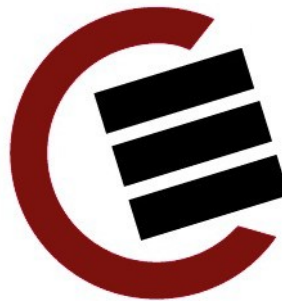
Acknowledgements

About the Great Lakes Equity Center

The mission of the Great Lakes Equity Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design series of practitioner briefs is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequitycenter.org.

Disclaimer

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DOMAINS OF POLICY

Domains of School Policy	Policy-as-Written	Policy-as-Practice
MANAGEMENT OF CONDUCT Policies coordinate and/or control the dress, language, and actions of students and staff in schools. Beyond policy texts such as formal dress codes, attendance requirements, and academic codes, teachers and students often create and enforce unwritten policies about what can be said and done in school. The expectations for behavior are not always taught or otherwise made explicit, and when individuals -- particularly students -- fail to comply with the expectations inherent in written and unwritten conduct policies, the consequences are often punitive and result in removal from instruction.		
ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES & OPPORTUNITIES Policies within this domain determine where, when, and to whom resources and opportunities will be distributed. For students, these policies regulate placement in classes, access to extracurricular activities/athletics, distribution of experienced teachers and staff, and inclusion in programs and supports. Moreover, these types of policies govern access to and types of professional learning opportunities and classroom resources that staff may or may not receive.		
LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING Policies can be used to grant authority and delineate the roles and responsibilities of individuals. When policies remove discretion from individuals in schools, as in the case of zero tolerance discipline policies, inequities can result. At the same time, vesting a single individual or group of individuals at the school site with too much discretion and authority can also result in negative outcomes. Policies should provide guidance for professional discretion and look to create cooperative decision-making processes that include a diversity of perspectives, particularly those from traditionally marginalized groups that are often unrepresented in positions of power and authority.		

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

What is the intent behind this policy?

What is it we want to accomplish?

What social constructions does this policy embrace?

Do we agree that this is how the world works?

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Who benefits from the way things are and who does not?

Is this the way we want things to be?

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What actions will redress the inequities that we see in our policies?