

## Understanding Education Policy

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Understanding Education Policy**

By Chris Rolph

UK: SAGE Publishing, 2023, 248 pages (hardcover)

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### **Reviewed by:**

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Education policy is a complex, constantly evolving topic that is central to any academic study of education. This book offers a critical contextual analysis of education policy and the political ideas that drive it. The analysis is summarized by assessing the real-world impact and consequences of government initiatives and considering key contextual issues.

Author Chris Rolph is the Director of the Nottingham Institute of Education at Nottingham Trent University. Rolph's understanding of educational policy has been informed by three decades working in the sector. This book offers a critical contextual analysis of education policy and the political ideas that promote the policy. The book explores a thoughtful journey towards a new view of politics in England, looking at key areas of the education system such as curriculum, special educational needs or disabilities, pedagogy, and school workforce.

The book consists of twelve chapters, each followed by a case study of current practices in the form of a policy document. Suggested study questions encourage reflection individually or as the basis for class discussion.

The first chapter is an examination of the historical background of British educational policy from the mid-19th century to the 20th century, that underlies the development of contemporary education and schooling. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's two world wars each affected the development of education policy. The developments during the wars were expressed within the framework of educational acts of 1902, 1918, and 1944. Chris goes on to discuss how progressive approaches of the 1960s continue to influence the neoconservatives of the 2020s.

The author practically views politics in two ways: first is that behavioral norms can define policy, and second is that policy will be implemented as people reflect their principles in their actions. He evaluates education policy in terms of principles, power, practice, and paper. The author focuses on the rise of neoliberalism and the marketization of schools post-2020, as defined by Daniel Stedman Jones. Jones says neoliberalism began as a movement of intellectuals determined to preserve liberal values such as individual freedom and limited government, which they believed were threatened by the expansion of the British government. Rolph argues that the landscape of choice, performance measures, accountability, and pledged liberty of human beings and schools, can only be comprehended by reference to mid-century values and prejudices. The author believes that accountability is not a neoliberal ideal, but accountability allegedly provides market intelligence for parents.

In Chapter 7, the author examines the meaning of curriculum and looks in some detail at the contents of the British National Curriculum. He discusses how accountability measures drive curriculum design and introduces those quasi-subjects that schools include in their broader curriculum. Chris also discusses the hidden curriculum in which children learn from the embedded values and ethos of a school.

Rolph claims that the English system has become more inclusive over the last 40 years, but this progress is in line with neoliberal changes rather than due to them. Social justice is discussed towards the final chapters, including issues of wealth and socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, religion and faith, and the vagaries of geography. The author emphasizes that they bear the fingerprints of neoliberalism, including early education of children under five, higher education, especially university, and all other adult education embraced by the label of lifelong learning.

Rolph's book is suitable for anyone studying education studies degrees at undergraduate level, trainee teachers seeking a deeper understanding of how policy affects the

schools they will work in, and master's students wanting a clear primer on the subject who want to have a comprehensive perspective on understanding education policy. The book is written in understandable language and enriched with case studies from educational settings. The definitions have been deepened and the framework of the conceptual expression has been well determined. The pessimism of those opposed to neoliberalism is challenged by an optimism rooted in humanity found in all educational institutions and structures.