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## What may be: policy enactment in education, a new conceptual framework with actor-network theory

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# What may be: policy enactment in education, a new conceptual framework with actor-network theory

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I present a new conceptual framework constructed using sensemaking theory and Actor–Network Theory (ANT) to demonstrate layers of policy enactment. The framework reimagines policy enactment as a sociomaterial ethico-political activity by considering the factors that mediate policy enactment and the assemblages facilitating the translation of policy into action. The framework forms an idealised cycle, using concepts from sensemaking theory including sensegiving and the system builder and Actor–Network Theory; problematisation, interessement, enrolment, mobilisation and stabilisation. This framework is then applied to research focussing on a forming Multi-Academy Trust and the attempt to establish joint 6th form provision. This highlights the potential human, contextual and material difficulties faced by schools as they attempt to translate national policy into practice and work together. The conceptual framework provides an alternative way of thinking about policy enactment, one that allows a reflection on the difficulties associated with translating policy into practice whilst also offering insights to help these to be overcome.

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ethico-political activity;  
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Multi-Academy Trust

## Introduction

Policy is found everywhere in education and schools, but the aims of policies are often multifaceted, leading it to be ethically ‘struggled over’ (Ozga 2000, 1) by those meant to enact it. The scope and influence of policies are unpredictable and vary based on whom, and for whom, the policy is initially developed. For example, some national initiatives such as the Education Reform Act 1988 shaped and continue to shape experiences of schooling and education in England. Whilst others, such as the introduction of the 14–19 diploma in 2008 (announced in the 2005 green paper ‘National Skills strategy: 14–19 Education’) have had limited long-term curriculum impact and largely been abandoned (Isaacs 2013). Local school-specific policies, such as the implementation of a new uniform, or behaviour policy, can have far-reaching effects on the actions of the staff and pupils, whereas other policies stall and exist in name only. Some national policies from the Department for Education (DfE) can be creatively applied to an extent by educational

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leaders, to suit their local needs. However, many other national policies are mandated and become adopted regardless of the need of local schools, students or communities. One such policy is the Academies Act 2010, this encouraged all good and outstanding schools in England to convert to, or form, a Multi-Academy Trusts. This was a divisive and controversial (Gunter 2012) policy resisted by some school leaders and Local Authorities, and it is this policy and associated research that the second half of this paper will focus upon.

Adopting a national policy and often despite the best of intentions, such policy rarely gets put into practice in the ways in which it was intended by its developers. Policy is a political 'process rather than a product involving negotiation, contestation and struggle' (Ozga 2000, 2) which is often left incomplete. There are many contextual factors that mediate the understanding of policy priorities and limit the extent to which they can be engaged with in local settings. It is this gap, between policy development and being put *into action*, the space in between which stakeholders work (and struggle) to translate policy into practice, that the first part of this new framework attempts to explain. The framework also demonstrates how policy becomes enacted once initial sense has been made by utilising a mixture of both sensemaking theory and Actor-Network Theory mapping the assemblages, and the process of making and giving sense that takes place as a policy moves from development into action. This framework extends the enactment work that has gone before by using Actor-Network Theory to draw closer to the ways in which the networks begin to form and the policy changes action. ANT researchers often 'explore mundane everyday practices' where 'ideas stabilise, and systems are established' (Gorur et al. 2019, 4) The latter part of this article will focus on one such 'mundane' practice, the provision of bus transport and its effect upon the forming Academy's joint 6th form. I will then argue that although the framework illuminates the issues faced when enacting policy into practice, it also highlights ways to tackle and overcome these difficulties.

I begin with a brief discussion of policy and implementation studies, the work and scholarly understandings that has informed the development of this new framework, and the gaps it addresses.

### **Policy studies and enactment**

The field of policy 'Implementation Studies' contains a whole wealth of work attempting to unpick the processes involved when converting a policy into action. This work began in a positivist fashion, suggesting that the success of implementation can be measured in terms of policy impact (Hill and Hupe 2003) or that the value of a policy can be 'measured in terms of its appeal and implementability' (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984, XV). The effects of policies have also been measured in statistical terms, for example, the success of a new curriculum measured by improvements in exam results. Policy was presented as a 'logical outcome of a problem-solving process' and 'a linear and sequential process in which policies pass largely unproblematically from conception to evolution' (Bell and Stevenson 2015, 147). Recently, however, understanding has shifted towards an interpretivist stance, recognising 'processes of sense making and translation' that occur before a policy gets near to implementation (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Clarke et al. 2015) or put *into action* in the setting. Policy is 'not seen as neat and tidy but rather as

a messy process in which at any point in the cycle participants negotiate over future trajectories, outcomes or implementation' (Bell and Stevenson 2015, 147). This understanding of messy policy fits with policy experiences and interventions that come thick and fast, often layer up and contradict one another, as found in education. This move recognises the complicated trajectory of policy implementation by problematising the concept of success and/or failure of a policy, viewing it as a complex non-binary activity.

Pressman and Wildavsky's seminal work 'Implementation' (1984) was one of the first attempts to investigate policy implementation and why policy fails, or rather the 'differences between actual and intended consequences' (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984, XV). They suggested that even the 'apparently straightforward is really complex and convoluted' (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984, 93) and investigated why some policies, even those with support from stakeholders, are not fully realised into practice. However, their concept of implementation as 'a process of interaction between the setting of goals and actions geared to achieving them' (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984, XXI), glossed over the complexities involved in such interactions and did not go far enough to demonstrate not only the way policy fails but also how it is often reshaped by local contexts.

Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992) began to address this gap by challenging the dichotomy between the generation and implementation of policy and the managerialist perspective which considered policy to be a linear process, something which 'gets done to people' (p. 7). In their investigation of policy, Bowe et al. analysed the Education Reform Act 1989 and created a 'continuous policy cycle' to illustrate how policy comes into being across three policy contexts; firstly, the 'context of influence' where the policy is created or initiated, where it comes from, who has developed it. This is followed by the 'context of policy text production', the text that represents the policy, used to make sense of the policy by stakeholders, and finally, the 'context of practice' the area of practice that the policy relates to, where it will be applied, and it is in this area that the policy can be recreated or adapted to fit the context (1992:20).

This cycle challenges the idea that policy has a neat beginning and end and highlights the presence of power and the role of ideology in each context. Like Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) it utilises the word 'implementation' to describe the policy outcome; arguably this is problematic, as policy is rarely put into practice in such a linear fashion. This framework does, however, offer important insights into the role of sensemaking and context on policy enactment, which were developed by the scholars that follow.

### ***Policy translation***

Similar to Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992), Clarke et al. (2015) are critical of what they call the traditional Policy Studies approach that adopts a positivist rationalist epistemology (Clarke et al. 2015, 13) on the grounds of it being too linear, with an over-simplistic view of policy as something that moves in one predictable direction failing to capture policy that is 'always in the making, or under construction'. Clarke et al. (2015) claim that the crucial element of policy enactment is a process of translation. Translation occurs as the policy is made sense of and applied accordingly to the local context. This process of sensemaking is experienced by all who work in the organisation and is the key to policy success or failure, it explains why some policies are bent and altered to fit the context.

Clarke et al. state that ‘when policy moves it is always translated or made to mean something new in its new context’ (Clarke et al. 2015, 9). This understanding of policy as a dynamic entity allows a deeper understanding of why policy has differing effects in different places. Translation is an ‘orientating metaphor and conceptual lens’ (35) to understand how policy is ‘given meaning and life as it moves from context to context’ (ibid 32). It mediates between ‘what is and what is to become’ and is a non-neutral ‘deeply politicised’ process or ‘form of exercise of power’ (ibid: 37). This process is ethical and political, as through the decision-making process regarding which policy to adopt, opportunities are simultaneously created and closed off. Clarke et al. (2015) describe this as ‘wayfaring’: ‘as we go one way, rather than another . . . in so doing, we both create and limit the future ways that we may go’ (Clarke et al. 2015, 179). This aspect of policy enactment is developed further by Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), discussed below.

### ***Policy enactment and contexts***

Ball suggests that ‘policy changes the possibilities we have for thinking otherwise’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 15) and introduces specific contexts that act to limit or promote changes relating to the enactment of policy. These include ‘situated context’, ‘professional cultures’, ‘material contexts’ and ‘external contexts’. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) admits this is not an exhaustive list, and that they are often interlinked.

The ‘situated context’ is ‘historically and locationally linked to the school such as [its] setting, history and intake’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 22). The ‘professional cultures’ include the ‘ethos, teachers’ values and commitment within school’ of its staff (27). ‘Material contexts’ are the ‘physical aspects of a school, the buildings and budgets, levels of staffing, information technologies and infrastructure’ (33). The ‘external contexts’ are the ‘pressures and expectations of wider local and national policy framework such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions . . . the degree and quality of Local Authority (LA) support and relationships with other schools’ (36). It is these contexts that will mediate the ability of the school to enact policies such as the Academies Act 2010 mentioned later and can explain why policies impact upon school settings in varying ways.

Ball’s observations about the influence of context on policy enactment highlight the differing approaches, attitudes towards and constraints that schools face when deciding which policy direction to take. It expands work completed by Clarke et al. (2015) covering the translation of policy and develops Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992) earlier work examining policy cycles by identifying the mediating factors inhibiting enactment.

These scholars show that policy enactment is often not straightforward and its effectiveness, and indeed acceptance, is mediated by a myriad of different factors. Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992) suggest ways in which policy implementation is a cyclical process with no clear beginning and end. Clarke et al. (2015) expand the original linear understanding of policy implementation by suggesting that a process of translation takes place, where the policy becomes bent to fit the local context and specific circumstances. It is within this process of translation that policy enactment can go awry and not meet its original aims. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) suggest context is a vital player in the enactment of policy and will limit the school’s ability to initiate change. There is a gap here, however, as none of them demonstrate the process the policy moves through in

terms of the micro ‘goings on’. Why do some policies become seemingly unproblematically worked into practice, and others stall? Reflecting on my own personal experiences, I spent a decade working as a teacher in an exhausting and relentless policy climate and, like Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992), I observed this process as a cycle. Many policies became trapped, usually because they did not make workable sense to the stakeholders in practice. I observed this cycle beginning with sensemaking as the first step towards policy enactment, but then the process became more complex, involving a mixture of human (e.g. leadership team, the students or teachers) and non-human actors (size of classrooms, availability of teaching resource etc.) often blocked the policy as it was put *into action*. This is where Actor- Network Theory becomes helpful as it extends Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) focus on context to reveal the influence of sociomaterial factors (the entanglement of human and non-human entities) and multiple Actor Networks layering up to affect policy action.

### **Sensemaking for policy enactment**

Sensemaking is quite simply ‘the making of sense’ (Weick 1995, 4), the process where people retrospectively ‘work to understand issues that are novel, ambiguous, confusing or in some other way violate expectations’ (Maitlis and Christianson 2014, 57). Weick (1995) suggests that people play a role in constructing the events they attempt to understand, and I argue that in this construction lies the foundations of policy enactment. The role of the leader is paramount in these early stages; they are the ‘system Builder’ (Cressman 2009) or ‘sensegiver’, who strategically shapes the sensemaking of others ‘through the use of symbols, images, and other influence techniques’ (Maitlis and Christianson 2014, 68). This ‘attempt to affect employees’ sensemaking ... is a crucial leadership activity during organisational change’ (Kraft, Sparr, and Peis 2018, 71).

There is also some scholarly cross over between sensemaking and the policy enactment literature discussed previously, often sensemaking is inferred but not named as part of the enactment process. Degn (2015) describes policy enactment as the ‘final characteristic of the sensemaking sensegiving process ... as the sensemaker constructs ... the premises for future sensemaking’ (2015:904). Policy enactment literature provides an active application for sensemaking and sensegiving theory, a context and opportunity to see the making and giving of sense in action. It also provides an ethical dimension, as mentioned by Clarke et al. (2015) and Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) policy decisions both open and close off future opportunities, and as such the sensemaking of potential courses of action will have ethical implications.

### **Actor–Network Theory (ANT)**

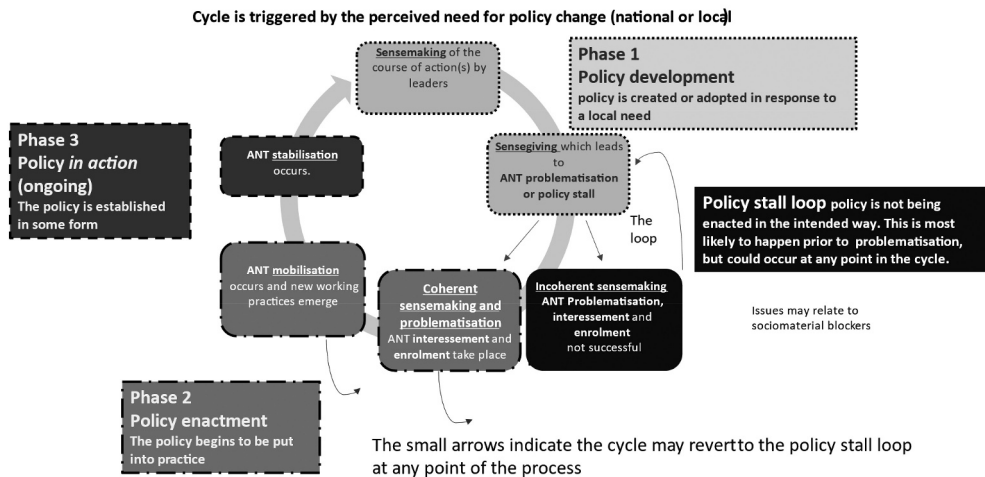
Actor–Network Theory is ‘a material semiotic approach describing the social world’ (Unsworth 2023, 57) that reveals the socio-material influences (the ways in which non-human actors entangle or interact with human ones) that assist or limit the enactment of policy. It does this by decentring the human, a radical approach that suggests that potentially the making of sense and enactment of policy may be affected by ‘material actors, metaphysical actors [such as ideas] and human actors’ (Unsworth 2023, 57). Reality, therefore, is not understood as ‘predetermined or solely the result of human

action’ (Unsworth 2023, 57). ANT offers the language with which to describe this process and can be used as a framework to tackle policy analysis through Callon’s (1986) stage model. Concepts from ANT can help to ‘draw closer to a phenomenon’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2012, x) and reveal the complex and ongoing negotiations that take place as the network forms, the way policy enactment operates as a sociomaterial ethico-political activity.

Callon (1986) describes ANT as the Sociology of Translation, however translation differs from Clarke et al. (2015) use of the word; it involves the process of making connections between entities previously not connected through ‘micro negotiations’ producing extended chains of interconnectivity (Fenwick 2010b). I argue that for a policy to be put *into action*, this process of translation must occur, allowing the actor network to form.

In ANT, an actor can be a human, text, or building, something that makes other elements dependent upon itself and translates its will into the language of its own. . . [they aim to] create alignment of the other actor’s interests with their[s] . . . and when this process becomes effective it results in the creation of an actor network (Cressman 2009, 5). This is ‘radical symmetry’ (Callon 1986), the influence of sociomaterial actors and actants on network formation and thus action. Actants are entities not fully enrolled in the network, they become actors once enrolment has occurred. Ureta (2014) argues that policies are closer to assemblages than defined processes, and this understanding helps to disrupt the assumptions that they are stable, as they are always at risk of being pulled apart and redefined. This mirrors the way assemblages (collections of people and things) and links between them form in an actor network, and how they remain unstable requiring constant work to survive, as represented by the conceptual framework (Figure 1). It is important to note that an Actor Network often will not resemble a recognisable network as one would expect, but a web of relations (Law and Turner 2009) in the process of linking and breaking down, a virtual ‘cloud’, ‘continually moving

**The conceptual framework of policy development, enactment and action using sensemaking and Actor-Network Theory**



**Figure 1.** The conceptual framework of policy development, enactment and action.



shrinking and stretching, dissolving in any attempt to grasp it firmly' (Fenwick and Edwards 2012, x).

Callon (1986) identifies 'moments of translation' and his stage model provides an analytical tool. They demonstrate how the network takes shape using the terminology of problematisation, intersement, enrolment and mobilisation (Callon 1986) and stabilisation (Fenwick 2010b). By travelling through these stages, the actor network forms, and policy is put *into action*. ANT is a useful device to explore the gap between policy development and enactment; it illuminates the specific processes involved in policy generation and stakeholders sensemaking of policy. However, Law and Hassard (1999) argues that translation 'tells us nothing about how it is that links are made' (1999, 8) and Hamilton argues 'meaning making is not well addressed within ANT (Hamilton 2011, 70) thus, necessitating the inclusion of sensemaking theory in the initial stages of policy enactment. Sensemaking occurs prior to problematisation (see Figure 1) and helps to contextualise the change, or issue emerging, framing it ready for the stakeholders to accept the Obligatory Passage Point (usually leaders) and for problematisation to begin.

ANT is a complex theory containing many concepts that demonstrate the socio-material entanglement of social life, in the development of Figure 1, I have limited the focus to those concepts found in my research to be especially relevant to policy enactment.

## A new conceptual framework of policy enactment

Figure 1 Below demonstrates the movement of policy from its development, through enactment to being put *into action*. I avoided using the term policy 'implementation' as this implies a completion or fulfilment of the policy aims to an extent that rarely occurs; instead, I refer to policy *in action*. ANT shows us how some linkages work, and others do not work (Fenwick 2010b, 120) and networks are sociomaterial involving both human and non-human entities. Mol (2010) explains that 'in order for a network to form, associations have to be made ...' and these are not 'introduced into an empty world' (2010, 259). Context is significant, as other ways of operating, practicing, organising education already exist. ANT adopts a 'flat ontology' (Gorur et al. 2019, 4) disregarding the distinction between macro and micro actors, enabling it to 'trace connections between the local and the global ... linking separate contexts to local action' (Hamilton 2011, 58). Context is understood as relational rather than fixed, there is no pre-set structure on which human action takes place, rather a set of practices 'continuously enacted, maintained, prolonged, varied and challenged' (Gorur, Sorenson, and Maddox 2019).

Figure 1 was conceived as an idealised cycle; it is not expected that educational policy will move unproblematically all the way around it. It was designed to provide a tool for reflection and discussion; a way of operationalising the theories and providing a framework with which to question the ways the enactment of a policy is operating to alter practice. Policy enactment is not a neutral process but rather understood as a sociomaterial ethico-political activity involving a mixture of ethical and political sensemaking (and sensegiving), and sociomaterial actors. The framework highlights some of the potential issues it may encounter during this cycle whilst remaining sympathetic to the conceptual understanding of policy as contested and often only partially

enacted. This mirrors the forming actor network; as ‘translation is a process never a completed accomplishment’ (Callon 1986, 196) always at risk ‘from external entities that crowd in and steal away the actors’ (Hamilton 2011, 60) potentially disrupting the network and the enactment of policy.

I have drawn links to sensemaking, sensegiving, policy enactment literature and Actor- Network Theory (ANT) within the following explanations of each phase to demonstrate the scholarly relationship between the theories.

## **Putting a policy into practice may be conceptualised as involving 3 phases**

**Phase 1:** Policy development

**Phase 2:** Policy enactment

**Phase 3:** Policy in action

However, there are occasions when straightforward movement through these phases is not achieved. For example, there is a risk of falling into the policy stall loop or ‘dissidence’ (Callon 1986, 223). Within the figure below, this is shown between phase 1 and 2 but could happen at any point as indicated by the small arrows. The rationale for this is explained below.

### ***Phase 1: policy development***

#### ***Making sense of the policy, framing a plan for other stakeholders, establishing legitimacy***

This phase begins with a policy, this may be national or local school specific, and will require a change in actions or practice. It is this change that the new conceptual framework seeks to represent.

ANT suggests that problematisation is where this process begins. For Callon (1986) problematisation involves something seeking to become ‘indispensable’ (ibid: 196) to the other actors. To do this, they will try to become established as an ‘obligatory passage point’ (Ibid: 196) (OPP) that frames the idea or solution in a way that to access it, others must pass through them; often this is an individual or a leader but could also be the policy itself. To access the solution, one must engage with the network. Problematisation results from ‘negotiated social construction activities ... influence[ing] the stakeholder ... to accept that vision’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 434). These are ‘System Builders’ or ‘actors who initiate ... innovation and exert influence over its direction and trajectory’ (Cressman 2009, 7) often headteachers or Principals in an educational context. Once the system builders have made sense of the situation and actions required, and assisted the sensemaking of others, problematisation then can occur as they become obligatory passage points (OPP). Once this occurs, the cycle of policy enactment can move to phase 2.

For Ureta (2014) problematisation involves framing of an issue arising into a matter of policy concern, and I argue that it is in this act of framing that sensemaking and sensegiving occur. Sensemaking is therefore a necessary part of policy enactment and must occur prior to problematisation, as represented in Figure 1. Sensemaking assists in the redefinition of identities (as OPPs) and links between them and the actors they wish

to enrol which is necessary for problematisation to take place. It should be noted, however, that the response may look quite different in each context (Beech and Guevara 2019) depending on the initial sensemaking of the policy and existence of previously established actor networks. If sense is not made coherently or contains contradictions, problematisation will falter, legitimacy will not be fully established for the OPP and the cycle will become trapped in the policy stall loop (explained below). In summary, the process of problematisation redefines or reframes thinking about the world (or in this case a policy) and thus is the vital part of putting policy *into action*.

## **Phase 2: policy enactment**

### ***The policy begins to change practice***

In this phase the policy is beginning to be put into practice; this occurs via both intersement and enrolment (defined below) (Callon 1986). As the word enactment suggests, there is an element of acting, or trialling the new course of action, the policy response is not predictable at this point, although some stabilisation may begin to occur following intersement and enrolment.

Intersement is the moment another actor accepts interests defined by the focal actor (Callon and Law 1982) and detaches itself from its existing networks to join the new one as they become interested in the new course of action proposed by the OPP. This process ‘selects those to be included and those to be excluded’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 14) and is an important stage as it confirms the legitimacy of the problematisation and OPP through continuous sensegiving and begins to stabilise the network and move towards policy being put into action (stage 3). This process does not necessarily involve physically leaving or stopping something, it could be a mental shift in alliance or attitudes, or a cultural change in the workplace; it may happen rapidly or more slowly depending on the policy and wider context.

Enrolment then follows: roles begin to be given out to the members of the network and by executing them, the network begins to function, and the policy is enacted (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012) or successfully translated (Clarke et al. 2015) into being in some capacity. This may involve new responsibilities being awarded and changes to job roles to reflect the new ways of working. Once this has occurred, and the stakeholders are clear about their new roles in the emerging network, the cycle moves to phase 3. It is possible, however, that the sense made of the emerging network may still break, thus damaging problematisation, and if this happens, the cycle will divert to the policy stall loop (as indicated by the small arrows on the framework).

## **Phase 3: policy in action**

### ***The policy is now part of practice in one way or another, the network begins to act***

This phase indicates that the policy is being adopted into everyday work practices, to the extent that it is no longer questioned. For ANT, this is known as being ‘black boxed’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2012, 4). For some policies, this may never be reached, as other policies develop and take their place (layering of actor networks), or issues arise during the tentative enactment process.

For policies that do endure through the cycle network, mobilisation occurs once the network has become ‘sufficiently durable that its translations are extended to other locations and domains’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 14). This is indicative of effective and sustained sensemaking and sensegiving by both the leaders and other stakeholders and the enduring legitimacy of the problematisation and OPP.

Stabilisation occurs when ‘the network appears to be complete and durable and to exercise force while concealing the dynamic translations that created it and continue to maintain it’ (Fenwick 2010b, 121). The embedding of new work practices would be indicative of this, as would achieving the original policy aims. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that the network may still break at this point: as Callon (1986) states, translation is never fully completed and may fail, possibly because of a new conflicting policy initiative, and if that happens the cycle will revert back to the policy stall loop.

### ***Policy stall loop***

#### ***The policy is struggling to be worked into practice***

In this phase, the sensemaking and problematisation found in phase 1 have not been translated into practice in a way that would move it into phase 2 or 3. The word ‘stall’ was selected as it denotes some form of action, not a complete stop or inertia. This reflects the work stakeholders will invest to make sense of and enact the policy in question despite such difficulties.

Policy stall is characterised by ‘dissidence’ (Callon 1986), and the actors involved not fully cooperating with the network aims. This does not always signify a categoric or dramatic breakdown; it may appear as ‘ambivalent belongings’ involving actors remaining actants, not fully enrolled, but still part of the network. Fenwick and Edwards (2010, 113) suggest these are ‘leaky’ translations that hold together just about, which helps to understand not only network formation, but also the ongoing sensemaking work that takes place to maintain (or enact) it. This also fits with an understanding of policy enactment as neither binary or linear but instead fraught with complexities and contradictions. Enrolment can be productively partial, and actors can be members of multiple networks (Michael 2017, 56) that may pull their directional focus elsewhere, putting pressure on the original actor network. ANT understands that ‘networks, and their products, can be re-interpreted long after they are supposedly stabilised’ (Whittle and Spicer 2008, 10). This means that the actor network is vulnerable to stalling at any point, not just prior to problematisation. The conceptual framework recognises there are a multitude of variables that could and will disrupt policy being put into action, often these are sociomaterial, a complex mix of human and non-human blocking or confusing the network. Sensemaking, and problematisation may break during phase 2 or 3, catapulting the network back to the policy stall loop; this is represented by the small, curved arrows within [Figure 1](#).

If a policy becomes trapped in the stall loop, sensemaking and sensegiving need to be reassessed and reapplied to allow problematisation and the OPP to re-establish legitimacy. Depending on the extent of the sociomaterial issues, this may take time, and several attempts, which fits with the idea that sense is not just made once: it is an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation affected by contextual cues.

I will now apply the conceptual framework to a case study of a forming Multi-Academy Trust (Hay 2021) and the policy enactment of the Academies Act 2010 relating to a cross-school collaboration.

### ***Applying the conceptual framework to policy – multi-academy trusts***

Academy schools were first introduced by the Labour government in England in 2002. Labelled ‘city academies’, these were mainly focused on inner city areas and aimed to tackle the ‘failing comprehensives’ deemed to be ‘a cancer at the heart of English society’ (Adonis 2012, xii). These were sponsored by businesses, and later charities, philanthropists, and universities adopting a model developed from the English City Technology Colleges in the 1990s (Gerwitz, Whitty, and Edwards 1992, 207) as they attempted to tackle social and educational deprivation. Academies were a new breed of business-orientated schools that were to change the educational landscape and culture of schooling in England, an expansion of the neoliberal educational agenda set out by the Educational Reform Act in 1988.

The change of government in 2010 led to the rapid expansion of the Academies programme through the Academy Act. All Ofsted-rated ‘good and outstanding’ schools were encouraged to convert to academies with no sponsor. These new ‘convertor’ academies operated with a charitable ‘Trust’ and were encouraged to work together in groups forming ‘Multi-Academy Trusts’ (MATs).

There were four main aims of the academies programme from 2010. In brief:

- (1) Removal of the power of local government over education
- (2) National framework of performance targets
- (3) Collaboration between schools to provide impetus for school improvement
- (4) Successful head teachers to be ‘system leaders’

(Simkins et al. 2015, 333)

This set of objectives is part of the broader controversial aim of educational policy based on ‘economising’ where ‘practitioners are required to accept policy as a guide to action rather than develop independent judgements’ (Ozga 2000, 56). The scope of this article is to discuss how policy is put into practice; however, it should be noted that although they are discouraged from doing so, those working in education often question policy aims, particularly when they are ‘messy, contradictory, confused and unclear’ (Ball 2008) as found within the Academies Act. This creates a ‘complex, dynamic . . . incoherent and contradictory policy context’ (Gunter 2012, 14) that makes the enactment of the Act more difficult, as it creates a tension that may damage initial sensemaking and subsequent problematization.

Removal of local government power over education (aim 1) is indicative of the rejection of the ‘middle-tier system’ (Simkins et al. 2015, 2) which involved a ‘strong role for the mediating layer’ (Greany 2015, 129), as traditionally the Local Authority acted as a buffer between the school and the Department for Education. Instead, a ‘self-improving school system’ (SISS) (Greany and Higham 2018, 210) was encouraged based on the principles of ‘maximising school autonomy’ whilst also ‘raising the accountability bar for schools’ (Greany 2015, 129). Paradoxically, this was not conducive to active collaboration between schools (aim 3), as working together inevitably incurred a cost

(e.g. time and resources) that school leaders may not be prepared to invest. National performance targets related to exam results and accountability measures (aim 2) may also drive many schools to continue to compete with one another rather than collaborate. Aims 1 and 2 of the academies programme continue to encourage competition between schools and therefore sit at odds with aim 3, which promotes collaboration as an impetus for school improvement.

It is the collaboration part of the MAT policy aims that I will focus the rest of this article upon, as the challenges of working across schools provides a focus to illustrate the conceptual framework in action. This relates to a research case study examining the conversion of a school into a cross-town Academy-Trust, and its attempt to forge collaborative links with two school neighbours (reported in more detail in Hay 2021). The case study was conducted over a period of a year and comprised of interviews with Principals and Head teachers, teacher focus groups conducted both before and after the academy conversion and school policy documentary analysis. The research investigated the rationale behind academy conversion and how it altered practice at leadership and teacher level. The research findings led to the development of the conceptual framework (Figure 1) as the findings revealed a complex mix of sociomaterial actors, and contradictory sensemaking and sensegiving. This in turn confused the problematisation leading to divergent enactment of the policy of collaboration across school sites.

The conceptual framework can be applied to both large policy initiatives, and much smaller micro goings on. Cross-school collaboration represents a large-scale intervention, that is reliant upon individual interactions, subject to national and site-specific contextual factors. It therefore demonstrates several facets of the framework in action and many layers of actor networks helping and hindering the enactment of the collaborative Academy policy. I have selected one ‘moment of translation’ (Callon 1986) from the data that disrupted the emerging actor network; the provision of cross-town buses. This is a seemingly mundane part of all school operations, but in the context of establishing a joint 6th form provision, and coordinating student timetables, its impact was monumental. It also demonstrates the complex interplay between human and non-human actors. The first, however, is some policy background and context to the schooling provision and policy at this time demonstrating the way global and local are connected.

### ***Multi-academy trusts – tensions relating to collaboration in a diverse system***

The current incarnation of the Academies programme has led to the emergence of a patchwork of trusts, allegiances, chains and relationships that span, in some cases, the length of England. MATs are all different, operationally, ideologically and in the way the leadership of the Academy chain is disseminated to the staff. Carter and McNerney (2020) describe this as being ‘led tightly’ or ‘led loosely’ by their Academy-Trust. Those schools in loose arrangements usually share the values of the trust but maintain autonomy regarding implementation of core policies and initiatives. Those led tightly have less autonomy and are often made to implement policies and initiatives the Trust deems to be appropriate or required.

An Ofsted study in 2019 revealed a large amount of variation in terms of ‘what MATs did’ (Ofsted 2019, 10), illustrating the ways in which even national policy is put into action in different ways depending on the context. Some MATs perform little more than

‘health checks’ whereas others ‘direct almost all aspects of school life’ (10). Large geographically spread MATs, for example, adopt a common branding and ethos to mark them out as partners, but rarely meet with colleagues from other schools due to barriers such as geographical distance between them. In contrast, many smaller and geographically closer MATs, comprising a handful of schools that serve the same community of students, may enact the MAT in an alternative way. The origins of their relationships with one another may stem from a perceived local need to improve standards, for instance, or to reduce costs. Ofsted calls them a ‘family of schools with similar values and ambitions’ (2019:13) and it is often among these that the most cross-school collaboration is found. This was the nature of the Academy Trust at the centre of this case study research, a cross-town initiative comprising two secondary schools and one middle school drawing students from a local shared catchment.

### ***Challenges to school collaboration – the case of the newly forming MAT***

Collaboration between schools has not always been a policy priority and this has left a legacy on schools attempting to work together which links to the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). This ERA altered the educational landscape and culture in England by introducing principles of marketisation and competition. It was responsible for the creation of the standardised GCSE exam, and the invention of league tables which enabled, for the first time, schools to be actively compared to one another using exam data. This introduced the notion of parent (or rather, consumer) choice to school selection, which led to inevitable winners and losers in terms of student recruitment (Bash and Coulby 2019). In addition, this introduced the ‘precariousness of prestige’ (Coldron et al. 2014, 393) as school standards became judged on the latest set of exam results rather than their longstanding reputation. This precariousness is not conducive to cross-school collaboration, as even when part of a Multi-Academy Trust, they retain their individual DfE number and associated accountability to national performance indicators.

The introduction of the principles of autonomy and competition between schools by the ERA, particularly in relation to schools of the same age phase (such as high schools) dramatically and irrevocably changed the system. This has left a legacy that leaders wishing to collaborate with other local same-phase schools, like the schools within the case study discussed here, must grapple with. The relationship between the two high schools was described as being akin to ‘uneasy bedfellows’; they were forced together by the new MAT, yet their relations were built upon generations of distrust and remained coloured by their historical competitive relationships with each other.

### **The conceptual framework in action: an example of policy stall**

One aspect of the proposed crossed school collaboration in this research case was the establishment of a joint 6th form. Sense had been made and given to stakeholders which had helped to redefine the Principal and the newly created head of 6th form post as obligatory passage points (OPPs). There were several contextual reasons why the 6th forms needed to collaborate, including a drop in funding per student, competition from other local colleges and the small number of students at one of the schools. Problematisation reframed these policy concerns to one of opportunity. This was difficult, due to the enduring legacy of the ERA, and the history of competition between the

two high schools. The OPPs claimed the joint 6th form would facilitate the continued offer of a range of level 3 courses, save money by sharing staff and protect the schools financially by encouraging students to stay on for level 3 study. Students were encouraged to pick a combination of level 3 courses in either school; however, they would have to travel between the two school sites for their classes. The schools are located at opposite ends of the town, 2 miles apart, a 10-min drive in light traffic and a 45-min walk. Students would also remain on roll at their origin school (where they completed their GCSEs) and their results would be attributed to that school.

The attempt to bring these two 6th forms together coherently encountered many difficulties. This research took place in its first year of operation, during which time the schools converted from a hard federation to a Multi Academy Trust. The findings below demonstrate a complex interplay of sociomaterial factors that hindered the enactment of the joint 6th form, despite effective sensemaking and problematisation, leading to policy stall and the 6th form not operating as effectively as intended.

### The problem of the busses

- To minimise the movement of students across school sites within the school week the timetables were coordinated, and timings of the school days were brought into sync. Unfortunately, the last lesson of the day maintained a different finish time in both schools – as this was dictated by the bus timetables controlled by the Local Authority (LA).
- The LA would not provide a bus to transport students between the schools, however it took 6 months for this refusal to be put into writing, by which time the joint courses had already begun to run across the two schools.
- The LA would not provide a bus for students to their homes from anywhere other than their origin school.
- Affected students therefore had to leave their last lesson 15 min early (one-fourth of the lesson time) to enable them to board a cross-town bus (paid for by the Academy Trust) to get to their origin school in time to alight their bus home. This had a profound educational effect and damaged the student's ability to socially integrate into the new school.
- Due to the ongoing effects of political austerity measures imposed by the coalition government in 2010 neither the schools or the parents could afford to provide alternative transport, the catchment area is extremely large, and includes remote rural areas.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) offers a way of understanding these issues that decentres the human. The physical entity of the bus, bound up with the limits of the school timetable, and the geography of the local area, distance between the schools, the catchment area and the time taken to travel between schools, sits alongside the actions of the LA, school leaders, the teachers and the students. This results in a tangled web of relations pulling and pushing against each other. This network is holding together just about, but the actors listed here are impeding its effectiveness. Figure 2 (below) illustrates that the policy cycle has moved into phase two, sensemaking and problematisation was coherent and there is evidence of enrolment with new roles and responsibilities being



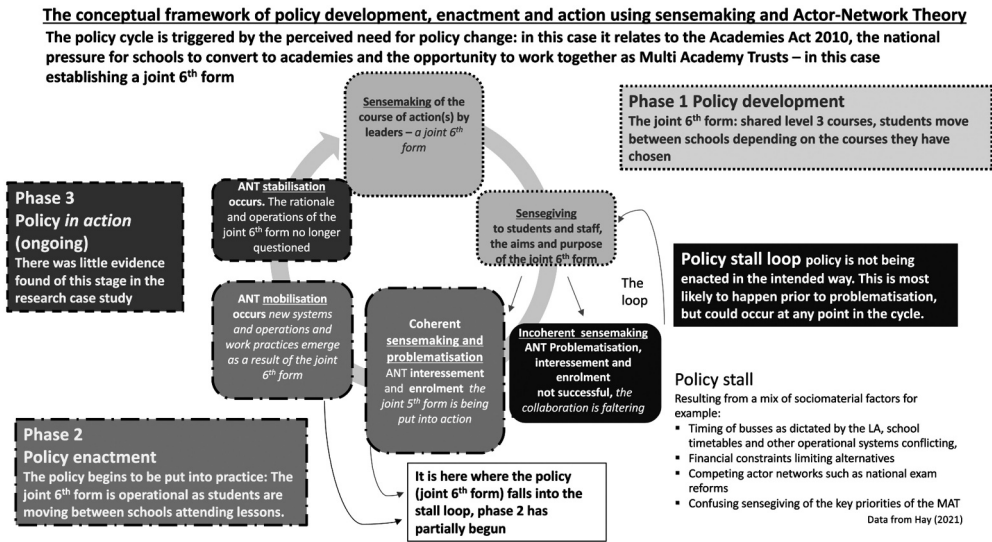


Figure 2. The framework in action.

distributed across the school sites. There is an attempt at mobilisation too, syncing the timetables, organising the level 3 courses between the schools. However, the issue with the buses stemming down to the contract between the bus companies and the LA, the agreed collection time, and the refusal to alter this catapults the actor network into the policy stall loop. This illustrates the flat ontology (Gorur, Sorenson, and Maddox (2019) of ANT, the decisions of the LA regarding bus contracts is not ‘out there’ it is part of the actor network with the bus itself, the timetable, the actions of the students boarding the bus, missing considerable lesson time. It is part of the context ‘relationally formed with and through the events which appear to happen within them’ (Gorur, Sorenson, and Maddox 2019, 312). Ultimately, the LA (and related bus contracts) remained an actant, not fully enrolled in the network due to an issue with initial sensegiving, the failure of the OPP to establish legitimacy and problematisation not fully being established. By the time this became apparent, parts of the actor network had already begun to move to phase 2, demonstrating the ways actor networks layer on to one another and resemble a cloud of assemblages, rather than a coherent web of connections. There are multiple actors in any one actor network at any time, and not all will be enrolled to the same extent due to their different contexts and competing motivations.

One of the main issues with policy enactment in schools is that there is never just one policy to implement. Policy developments flood education subject to political and economic drivers and forces both willing and unwilling change on the practice of the workforce. ANT helps us understand this flood as multiple actor networks, layering up, sometimes working with each other to strengthen the network, and other times disrupting it.

### The new conceptual framework and what may be: beyond the policy stall

By identifying the components of the actor network, we have the potential to disrupt and ‘shape a different approach’ (Unsworth 2023, 65) by uncovering the workings of power

and instability (Hamilton 2011, 71). Ultimately, as found here, some network belongings may never be more than ambivalent due to wider conflicts in the policy itself, or the inability to access additional resources, or alternative actor networks pulling actors focus in a different direction.

This new conceptual framework helps to highlight both the human and sociomaterial difficulties that schools may encounter when challenged with enacting educational policy into practice. It demonstrates the sociomaterial and human actants that can block policy which have resulted in the confusing and fragmented system of Academies in England today. Actor-Network Theory allows the analysis to expand beyond that of the human actors, providing a language with which to illuminate the many practical, contextual and material factors that impact upon the enactment of policy into practice. It provides a new way of thinking about policy enactment that can be applied beyond education to any field where policy change appears thick and fast, layers up and contradicts.

I have supplemented ANT with sensemaking as it fills some gaps in application by explaining the process involved *before* problematisation can be conceived, the journey to make sense of the emerging policy situation and give that sense to others that is often laden with ethical and political decision-making not adequately dealt with by the flat ontology of ANT. This part of the process establishes the legitimacy of the system builder and ensures that problematisation secures the OPP. When this process is successful it will ensure that all stakeholders are committed to a unified direction and set of actions. Without sense being made first, it is difficult to conceptualise where problematisation comes from, and the policy be put *into action* involving human and non-human actors. The research here revealed that the process of sensemaking alone was not sufficient to explain the policy *in action* process. It uncovered many mediating factors that led to sense breaking, due to both human actions (e.g. leadership decisions, inter-staff conflict and distrust) and material limitations (e.g. timetable restrictions, student transport across the town), this is why sensemaking was included alongside ANT.

Critics might argue that Callon's (1986) 'classical' ANT (Michael 2017) stage model is outdated, and that the theory has moved into 'after ANT' (Law and Hassard 1999) territory. Fenwick and Edwards (2010) argue, however, that the 'after' does not symbolise the end of ANT, but rather that there is more to be done, for example, new ways to use the theory as an 'intervention' or to 'reframe' educational issues (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 1, 2) as has been attempted here. They also warn against applying Callon's stages in rigid form to the data, ANT is not a stable body of work, rather one to be used to think and analyse (ibid: 167). Whittle and Spicer suggest that ANT be used as a 'sensitising concept to make sense of complex observations' (2008, 13) and thus by supplementing Callon with many other ANT scholars, and including sensemaking, this is a new way of understanding these stages. The application of ANT to policy enactment comes after the initial sensemaking and development of said policy, for if ANT is indeed a theory based on 'relational materiality' Law and Hassard (1999), there must in the first instance be relatedness of some kind be it between humans or non-humans.

ANT offers useful language with which to describe the process of policy enactment. It offers insight into the ways context may inhibit the enactment of the policy, extending the work of Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) and Clarke et al. (2015). The neoliberal historical legacy of the ERA found in the Academies Act 2010, continuing the promotion of competition between schools to improve standards coupled with the detrimental

effects of austerity educational resources contributed to the situated, material and external context (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012) affecting policy enactment in this research case. This new framework goes further, by suggesting specific issues relating to the effectiveness or partial mobilisation of the policy during the enactment process. This may include faulty problematisation relating to poor sensegiving or sensemaking, and the failure of the obligatory passage point to establish its legitimacy and enrol actants or stakeholders sufficiently to change action of the actors involved. Alternatively, this may relate to contradictions found within the policy itself, pulling actors in directions, and leading competing actor networks to form. By highlighting these areas of weaknesses, the framework provides the tools in which to overcome them: sense can be reframed and given again; problematisation can be re-legitimised. This framework illuminates potential blockers, beyond the humans involved, that once addressed, may make such policies more palatable, and accessible to those entrusted to make sense of them and ultimately enact them. It also illuminates the ways in which policy may falter, and in the stall loop hold together just about, or not at all. This adds an additional layer of understanding to the complex nature of putting policy *in action*.

ANT has limitations: the belief that all actions form part of a web of relations ignores the issue of power in organisations, as some entities naturally exert more influence over the network than others. Yet, Cressman (2009) argues that ‘we should not ask if this network is more powerful than another; rather, we should ask if this association is stronger than another one’ (2009:4) as it is within the strength of the network that it is able to exert influence. Similarly, ANT adopts a flat ontology (Unsworth 2023) not recognising the different influence of the micro or macro on policy or action (Fenwick and Edwards 2012). Many policies come from the macro – they are national initiatives and require careful translation to make sense in the local. ANT does not make the distinction between here and there, it merely understands the enactment locally of national policy as an indication the network is long or has extended (Fenwick 2010b, 122). This infers there is hope for some policy pushback and resistance, as the influence of extended actor networks may work in both directions as stakeholders question policy aims. National educational policy is driven often by the DfE, and perhaps it could be driven partly by academies themselves. This may have been a helpful approach for the schools in the MAT in this case to begin to shape their provision collaboratively in a way that tackled specific shared local educational concerns.

Finally, the notion of radical symmetry, treating humans and material objects as similarly influential on network formation and function goes too far for some who argue it ignores the intentional agency possessed by humans (Michael 2017) and the ‘the *meaningful* character of human action’ (Whittle and Spicer 2008, 621). In contrast, I argue that this is one of the more useful aspects of ANT: its ability to illuminate the additional actors beyond the human impeding action and change, many of which occur across multiple places, times and policy contexts.

There are ontological and epistemological similarities between ANT, sensemaking and the policy enactment literature, as they all ‘track the dynamics of the interaction’ (Cordella and Shaikh 2006, 8). Sensemaking suggests understanding is ongoing, always in flux, always being worked upon, and this is similar to ANT’s understanding of the network as always in creation requiring constant effort by the actors to keep it together. In addition, policy understood by Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) is ‘always in the

making, or under construction' not a stable entity, requiring ongoing work to enact and then maintain it, and ultimately this was the downfall of the joint 6<sup>th</sup> form in this case. With any theories, there are differences, however. The sensemaking and policy enactment literature focuses on human agency shaping action and the related ethical and political dimensions to this, whereas ANT blurs the boundaries between agency and structure by removing the distinction between human and non-human. ANT does not consider the policy terrain as configured by central powers 'that create and impose a set of standards' (Bell and Stevenson 2015). Instead, policy enactment is understood as 'effects that emerge through a series of complex interactions' (Fenwick 2010b, 121). In this case study, ANT provides an additional layer of understanding in the process of putting the collaborative policy *in action*, and relational materiality illuminates the myriad of issues this policy faced (human and non-human) along its journey. The complexity of ANT means it does not fuse easily other theories; however, here it is used to encourage the discussion of policy to move beyond that of the human actors alone and to demonstrate the ways in which it may never be complete.

Ultimately, this new conceptual framework is intended as a signifier of hope, that policy stall will not last forever, sense can be made again and problematisation and the OPP re-legitimised. Rather than indicating missed policy opportunities, the framework is optimistic. It offers a new way of thinking about policy enactment, rather than suggesting what could have been, it offers a brave suggestion what may be, as we work to make sense of, and then put policy *into action*, remaining sensitive to the potential human, contextual, material, ethical and political difficulties that may be encountered along the way.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by Keele University All participants provided informed consent via consent forms and information sheets.

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