

## **Subaltern agency and language education policy: Implementing a language policy on the ground**

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*The focus in this paper is on the implementation of language policy in education. It explores and discusses the notion of subaltern agency in an education organization. Recent language policy research highlights individual and collective agency in the processes of language use, attitudes and policies. People on the ground, charged with implementation are not the passive receivers of policies or the vague resisters once depicted in research accounts, referring to public body practitioners, but social actors who can exercise subaltern agency. The aim is to show that language policies are not merely implemented, but are actually shaped on the ground. Examples of subaltern agency from a case study of the Official Languages Act Ireland (2003) are explored.*

*Keywords:* language policy, agency, subaltern agency, policy implementation in education

### **Introduction**

One of the aims of this paper is to present and describe the notion of subaltern agency in language policy implementation and to demonstrate the role which it plays in the way that education language policies are negotiated, diversified and appropriated in specific local contexts.

The new linguistic dispensation (Aronin & Singleton 2008) is characterised by a vast diversity of populations and multiple languages in space and time. Diversity and identity have become especially active foci of investigation in the study of languages and society. Multiple and diverse 'identities are reconfigured, recovered and rejected' (Riley 2010:376) against the background of a myriad of contemporary social change. Diverse and multiple identities come into play more and more as language education policies are being brought into implementation. In the fine-grained details of everyday discursive practices and behaviours on the ground- in staff offices and in classrooms, policy orthodoxies

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are transformed and translated in accordance with local outlooks, multiple identities and practices.

Subaltern is a term that commonly refers to individuals or groups who socially politically and geographically reside at the margins of or outside of a particular hegemonic power structure. The notion of subalterneity has been commonly used in post-colonial discourse to refer to individuals or groups who socially politically and geographically reside at the margins of or outside of a particular hegemonic power structure. The term is most commonly associated with Gramscian influenced post-colonial theory, and of course has been reappropriated by the literary critic Spivak (1988) in the context of trying to establish a collective locus of agency in postcolonial India. In the context of implementation of a language in education policy, the term is harnessed here in a particular way to denote social actors (teachers, parents, local politicians and local administrators etc.) who become the crucial agency that affects and shapes the way policy is eventually implemented.

Language policies for individuals in local school/education communities may only very loosely coincide with the original orthodox formulation moulded by the policy maker. What is in certain formal contexts referred to as *official policy* may undergo many nuances and configurations in local contexts. Local agency tends mainly to act out of a discourse of the local. This understanding of the way that the local has a bearing on the thinking and behaviour of “subaltern” local agency on the ground is often overlooked by or hidden from the policy maker’s centralist gaze.

In what follows we suggest that subaltern agency plays an increasingly important part in the way that standardized and homogenous education policies are diversified and transformed in implementation. First, we discuss how language policies function *de facto* for individuals and communities on the ground. After emphasising the fact that language policy must include local behaviours, the final section of the paper serves to illustrate subaltern agency in practice, drawing on study of policy trajectory in the case of the Official Languages Act 2003 as an example.

## Revisiting policy formulation

How is policy formulated? There are, of course, a number of perspectives or orientations that may shape the formulation. Policy decisions at the centre or at the macro level are often the result of consensus building and achievement and may be driven by:

- ideological motivations (Blommaert 2006) (nationalism, nation-building, identity);
- resource issues and debates (cost/resources/plan of evaluation);
- a sense of participation/end user (a consideration of those who will buy into the policy).

The latter issue of participation is perhaps the most critical, since the ultimate success of any policy can be gauged in the way it empowers and facilitates the end user. But it is often the case that the issue of resources might predominate policy makers’ thinking, over-riding considerations of the end user. It is also

true of course that policy makers may operate too without any particular orientation consciously in kind.

When is a policy deemed to be effective? From the policy maker's perspective, the formulation of a language policy and its formal adoption might show that, on the surface, the language curriculum, teaching and learning are being regulated things are working and are seen to be working. A language policy is deemed to be effective if all the right boxes can be ticked. Institutions can parade policy, as it were, point to the policies that are in place, e.g. *xyz* are offered on the curriculum, *xyz* languages are allocated certain hours and there are common approaches to teaching and assessment etc. Once a policy exists and is seen to be operative, policy makers and administrators are happy and are always vigilant over implementation, striving to include new stipulations and provisos. However policy implementation on the ground is the acid test as to how effective any language policy really is. This is discussed in the next section.

### **Conceptualisation of policy implementation**

When a language policy is formulated at the central/macro or mega level, the implementation stage as a component of policy process at the micro level can be quite complex. Implementation cannot be assumed to follow automatically and successfully from the stages of formulation and authorisation stages that precede it.

This paper emphasises language policy in education as being more than the mere interpretation of official government texts in the context of regulation and implementation of the language curriculum. Recent approaches conceptualise language policy as a complexity of human interactions, negotiations and production mediated by interrelationship in contested sites of competing ideologies, discourses and powers. New frameworks enable us to examine language policy in education as covert and overt, bottom-up and top-down as *de facto* and *de jure*. These elucidate themes of agency, ecology and negotiation. They are being used more and more to scrutinise the policies that nation states apply to their ethnic and linguistic minorities.

The rational planning model of decision-making which has prevailed up to now in language policy implementation works on the assumption that agency is only present at the centre. Often, criticism of inadequate half-hearted implementation of policy and the failure to achieve the goals specified tends to posit policy as being 'rational'. From this perspective, implementation is perceived as an administrative process, devoid of values, interests or emotion (Wagenaar & Cook 2003) or agency. People are considered only as either those who have policy done to them or as shadowy resisters (Ball 1997). We argue here that policies are not merely implemented, but are actually shaped on the ground (Ball 1997) through what we term here as subaltern agency. It is in the local and situated micro realms that that planning has its ultimate impact. (Ó Laoire 2008: 167; Kaplan & Baldauf 1997; Liddicoat & Baldauf 2008). Accordingly, and in line with recent language policy research which highlights individual agency in the processes of language use, attitudes and policies (Ricento 2000), subaltern agency is not conceived as the passive once depicted in research accounts, referring to public body practitioners (Ball 1997; Shohamy 2009), but as an active and powerful social agency of change exercising power

and influence within the constraints imposed by organisational structures (Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum 2009). This is consonant with Lo Bianco's (2010) idea of language policy being more than just a text, but a democratic and behavioural process. It is in the local site of the school or the administration office for example, where the main agents in language education, principals, teachers, learners and the learners' communities grapple and struggle with issues. It is in relation to discourses and struggles on the ground that policies are negotiated, appropriated and enacted. It is within the process of confronting and grappling with issues in the local site that certain discourses emerge and evolve; debates, contested arguments, formal staff meetings, meetings with parents and meetings in corridors. It is through these discourses that policies are crafted and legitimated. It is here in the site of struggling with different languages, that competing ideologies, discourses and powers are contested.

Implementation of language policy occupies an intermediary space between formulation and practice on the ground, encompassing spaces beyond the classroom at every level from face-to-face interactions, to community motivations and ideologies. Understanding the interpreters and negotiators and perhaps resisters of policy can pry open an ideological space where researchers on language education policy need to situate themselves. This becomes possible only when we include the ethnography and narratives of agents acting in and through the local site. This is discussed in the next section.

### **Re(de)fining agency in the local site**

Research accounts of language education policy implementation have adopted a more situated approach to language policy and conceive policy and planning to be hybrid rather than unitary entities. Corson (1999:24-25) argues thus that "...the discourses of power that exist within schools can be used to improve the human condition, to oppress people, or to do almost anything in between...A language policy can be a powerful discursive text that works directly in the school's interest. Freeman (2004) suggests that the contradictions found between policy formulation and beliefs and practices in local contexts can open and use ideological and implementational space to promote bilingual; education at classroom, community and policy formulator levels Ramanathan (2005) taking stock of language education policies for English and vernacular-medium education in Gujarat, India provides evidence from teacher practice that language education policies are embedded in local rather than central political power structures and behaviours. He sees language policy as a grounded situated reality rather than an abstract text formulated "behind closed doors and formalized in a document without paying much heed to local realities" Ramanathan (2005:98). Thus language policies are hybrid entities that draw their force and movement from the lives of real people. Thus the ethnography of the local community becomes a valuable starting point to illuminate local subaltern interpretation and can be used in simultaneously formulating and implementing language policy.

Canagarajah (2005: xiv) states that the notion of the local is often shortchanged in the discourses on globalization, and reminds us that:

The local shouldn't be of secondary relation or subsidiary status to the dominant discourses and institutions from powerful communities whereby the global is simply applied, translated or contextualized to the local. Making a space for the local doesn't mean "adding" another component or subfield to the paradigms that already dominate many fields. It means radically reexamining our disciplines to orientate to language identity, knowledge and social relations from a totally different perspective.

He (2005:155) suggests that ethnography of local communities can be used to build language policy models and inform policy-making. "Developing policies informed by ethnography can counteract the unilateral hold of dominant paradigms and ideologies in language policy". Similarly Hornberger and Johnson (2007:509) illustrate how local ethnographies in two different contexts in the US and in Bolivia including interpretations, negotiations and resistances can reveal spaces where local actors implement in varying and unique ways. Heller (2006:221) argues equally for an approach in research where the trajectories of the social actors who participate in a school's discursive spaces be fleshed out in order to allow us to understand the scope of action available to individuals and the structural constraints that shape their experience.

The research discussed here would indicate, therefore, that the scope, power and capacity of human agency in implementation must not be overlooked in language policy perspectives and practices. The scope, potential and role of the "local" has also recently been re-appraised and re (de)defined. Pennycook (2010:54) pursuing critical theory approaches impels a debate that does not equate the local with the "small", inconsequential or trivial:

We need to understand how language planning often builds on small local actions, on decisions made in communities, on local publications. Such a focus on local action is a useful corrective to the bland work on language planning that has held sway for too long, doing little more than describing national policies. The local, however, should not simply and solely be interpreted as constituting micro or bottom-up phenomena. At the same time, however, we need to be cautious lest a focus on the local remain only on the bottom-up, the micro, the contextual, and is thereby bereft of more powerful interpretations....When we think of locality, we should not be concerned with either smallness or proximity. (Pennycook 2010: 54.)

Focusing on the local entails radically re-examining our disciplines to orientate to language and social relations from a totally different perspective. Pennycook proposes the notion of spatial turn and spatial practice, meaning that all human behaviour and practice can only be understood in relation to the space or locality in which they are constituted. Rather than being a backdrop or a neutral setting the locality is a central interactive part of the social and behavioural. This means that greater attention must be paid to all thinking, practices, and negotiations at the local level.

### **Subaltern agency**

The concept of subalternity which involves, rather than excludes, agency in the local sites of language policy in education is the focus of this paper. Through everyday language practices and interpretations of linguistic realities in spatial

turns, those who are supposed to “implement” and ‘live’ the language policies never submissively ‘implement’ them, but, appropriating them, steer them in new, unforeseen directions, acting entirely in accord with the space and locality in which they find themselves. It is these dialectic processes of interaction between what is designed from above and how it is responded to from below that eventually give shape attitudinally and behaviourally to a language policy in education. The final section of this paper illustrates subaltern agency producing and reproducing changes at the early stages of implementation as an official language policy is being implemented in a site of education. The language policy in question is the Official Languages Act 2003 which is briefly introduced in the next section.

### **The Official Languages Act (2003)**

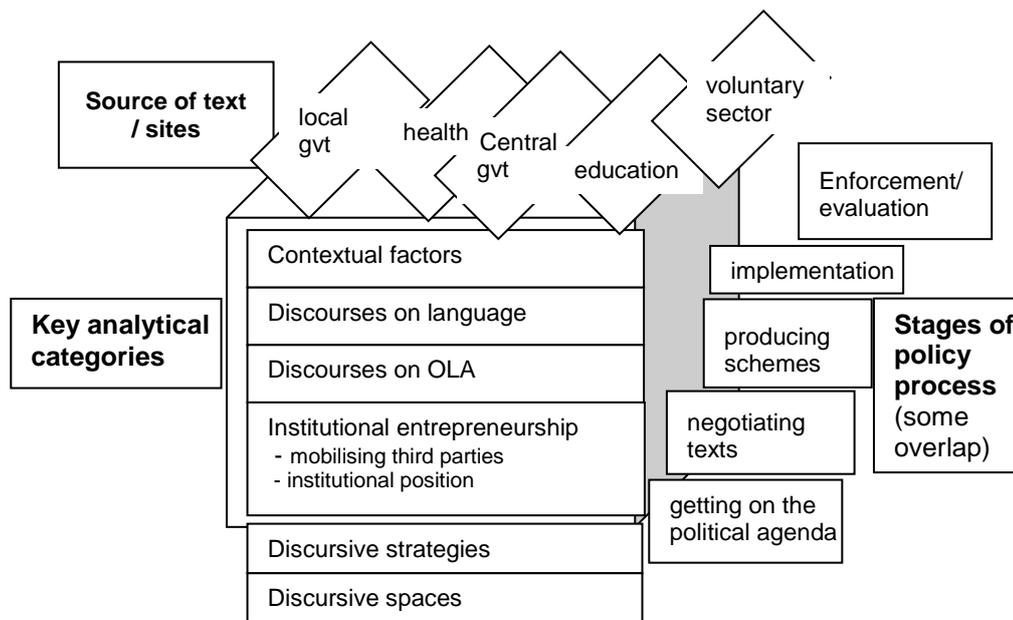
The Official Languages Act (OLA), signed in 2003 and fully enacted three years later, is the first piece of legislation since the establishment of the Irish state in 1922, to provide a statutory framework that regulates the provision of services by public bodies in the official languages of the state; Irish and English. The primary aim of the Act is to improve, in a phased way, the availability and quality of public services through the Irish language (Gaelic), chiefly by placing obligations and duties on public bodies. These duties and obligations emanate from the core provisions of the Act and from individual language schemes, produced by each public body under the guidance and subsequent agreement of the Ministry of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. A scheme, a feature adapted from the Welsh Language Act, is effectively a “renewable” plan which identifies and establishes the services the organisation provides in Irish, English and bilingually and outlines how it intends to phase increases in the quantity and quality of services provided in Irish over a three year period. The main policy instrument for advancing implementation is the creation of the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga (Language Commissioner), which is an independent statutory office akin to an ombudsman’s service. The role of the Commissioner, based on the federal Official Languages Act (1985) in Canada, is to monitor (and facilitate) compliance by public bodies and to provide advice or other assistance to the public with regard to their rights under the Act.

The OLA was, in fact, the combined result of language activism in the 1970s and 1980s and more strategic lobbying by the language voluntary sector in the 1990s (Walsh & McLeod, 2008), international rights movements which influenced language activists, and a favourable legal judgment which made it imperative to put legislation in place (Ó Murchú 2008: 87). While there has not been an over-elaborate focus on the Act there has been by a large a sustained positive response in the media and negative coverage of the Act to date has tended to center mainly on the costs associated with translation.

#### *Data collection and procedure*

The main research question in the study of the OLA we draw on here is: Which social actors have engaged in what activities using which spaces drawing on which discourses and using what discursive strategies with what effects? The data sources for this project consist of a wide selection of texts, publicly

available or collected at the research sites, and a number of semi-structured interviews at the levels of central government, language voluntary sector and public bodies, including education, some of the data of which is examined here. Data collected from public bodies consist mainly of internal correspondence and submissions to language schemes (Georgiou, Ó Laoire & Rigg, 2010). The interview participants in the public bodies include both frontline practitioners and individuals in managerial positions. Figure 1 below shows our conceptualisation of the policy process.



**Figure 1.** Conceptualising the contexts of policy process.

In the remainder of the paper, we analyse and discuss subaltern agency thinking in the case of one education organization as it tries to implement the OLA 2003. The remit of this organization is to govern and manage secondary schools and adult education programmes and initiatives within a particular area of Ireland, working in conjunction with other education and training agencies and community development bodies. As required by the Official Languages Act 2003, this public body was required to comply and draw up a scheme to phase increase in the quantity and quality of services provided in Irish. In an interview here with a manager of this organization, we find evidence of local factors that impact on the approach adopted in policy implementation, i.e. the local spatial turns of individual actors within this site have a dominant influence on the way policy is played out.

### **Evidence of subaltern agency**

Elsewhere we isolated evidence of what we term actors' "set ways" in all the public bodies examined. By this we refer to public workers' propensity for resistance to change and/or the habitual nature of much of their practices, which often prove resilient in the face of new regulations and guidelines and

constitute one of the basic institutional pressures toward stasis (Battilana et al. 2009). As well as finding confirmation of set ways in data elicited from one of the main actors in the education body, we point here to a number of other local dynamics at work that tend to influence the policy trajectory in the institution.

### *Locally motivated ideas, perceptions and expectations*

One of the main actors in the institution had a deep-seated commitment to and a good ability in the Irish language. Already in a managerial position in the local site, she was perceived and identified therefore by the organization as the only one who could be a driving force behind the new policy in the organization:

I was the only one at head office () about 50 people who could actually have a conversation in Irish.. so a:ll irish questions came to me automatically . anything to do with Irish . ehm () i.e. if there was a document to be written in Irish it came to me as well now my standard of spoken Irish is higher than my standard of written Irish but I still manage to write a document in Irish . or I did then . so I'm not very clear is it necessary that my role in xxx() was such that my responsibility was the development of the Irish language it was- I was the only one who could do it and I was the only one who showed any interest in it as well . so it's likely that it was a mixture of those that it was a) the fact that I was . identified in xxx as being the one who could speak Irish and had an interest in Irish

Agency is determined and set by local interpretation and circumstances as they had transcribed on the ground. Referring to the fact that she found herself responsible for the implementation of the OLA in the organisation due to locally and personally occurring circumstances:

...so my memory is that ehm () it probably fell to me- I'm sorry to become so complicated... it probably fell to me because of my role xxx . and the fact that I . spoke Irish speak Irish and that I had an interest in developing some capacity of Irish in xxx because there was none else.....it took me it took me a while and a couple of meetings in Dublin with people from the Department of the Gaeltacht to find out what was required . it sounded quite va:gue at the beginning from reading the act . I wasn't quite clear if for example in xxx it meant that A:LL our staff administrative and teaching would have to have proficiency in Irish because if we were putting on night classes in adult ed did we have to respond to some people coming in to any one of our schools and saying "I want to do my classes in Irish?"

...but it turned out that it wasn't involved it was simply it was simply the administrative sector if you like it was the people see-king information or seeking assistance with those kind of things that they would be able to do that in Irish so: () also the second thing I wasn't sure ehm () how () quickly and to what level . it was required to introduce Irish in the organisation. did they expect that we were to do- if my memory is right a five year plan a language plan I think it was five it could have been [three.

### *Power of local interactions: Intersection of centre and local*

Interactions with other members and co-workers in the organization was to have a bearing on how progress was made and as to how implementation was to proceed. A general positive reaction by the public servants on the ground and good will towards the policy becomes a mobilizing source of motivation.

so we had to ... motivate people and I must say quite a number of people responded well.

Local co-occurrence or concurrence is seen to take on a particular significance in the commitment towards implementation. In managing implementation within the organization this particular agent takes a spatial turn by joining forces with a public servant within the organization who also had a good command of the language and this in turn seems to re-anchor implementation agency.

: now as it happens there is one girl in that department who is very keen- she's from xxx and she was very keen to improve her Irish and get it up to a good level and she was () she she undertook to do a xxx diploma in Irish that was on here in xxx at the time . so anyway that was- that was great help.

There is a shift of emphasis and use from an "I" discourse where the manager sees herself as the sole agent of implementation in the initial stages to "we" as local support generates motivation. There is also evidence where agency wants to change the way the policy should be interpreted to accommodate to local conditions and circumstances. Consultation leads quickly to a rethink of what might be possible to implement in local circumstances. It must be emphasized here that in accordance with the OLA statutory obligation, consultation legitimately centered on what the response of the public body should realistically be in the construction of the scheme. We see evidence here of how local response and reaction forces the agent to rethink policy in terms of what was realistically achievable within the organization.

There was a lot of consultation. for me to be clear what it was we were required to do. explain that to the staff group and then we would look at how realistically we could implement that explain to the staff group and then we would look at how realistically we could implement

### *The local*

Being true to conditions, relationships and situations on the ground determine to a large extent what realistic implementation should comprise. There is a sense of the "possible" intervening in the discourse as policy intersects with local conditions of resistance. Such resistance was in evidence in the course of a focus group discussing the implications of implementing the OLA policy for frontline and administration staff in the educational institution. Referring to the challenge of the policy being implemented within the organization was greeted with initial derision as one of the administrative workers (A) explains with other administration workers B and C occasionally interjecting:

A: and it was going to have to be rolled out and cursed (laugh) between us about what we're going to do with this eh there was no say officer for promoting the Irish language applied within the scheme

Interviewer: mhm

xxxx

A: I think the other thing about it was I don't think there was A-NY . enquiry before it was [rolled out

Interviewer: mm

A: nobody came and said eh "is there is there a requirement for this service you can't provide at the moment?" I don't think there was anything I [certainly don't remember anything about that

B: [no . no]

C: [no no]

A: so it was rolled out it came it came as quite a surprise like that suddenly we were going to do this you know? without any notification that there was a requirement for this service

There appears to be a certain disparity, therefore, between the onus of the centrally mandated OLA policy and the mandate to construct a local meaningful policy in terms of its own scheme. Policy here is splintered along the two different communities: those commissioned to mandate (in this case the Department of the Gaeltacht) and those commissioned to implement (the public body in question). Agency here brings its own perspectives derived from the local. At this point in the discourse, she switches from “we” to “they” as she becomes aware of the demands that the OLA legislation was putting on the organization. Policy implementation was also a matter of keeping the “they”, the “other” satisfied:

and if we go back to when you first drafted the scheme and when it went on to the Department to have a look at

Interviewer: and then you said they came back to you with some revisions a little bit about [WHAT WAS THE NATURE

Agent: they wanted more specifics

Interviewer: specifics

Agent: they wanted it to be more specific I was tending to be more general in ehm . maybe bundling all the schools together and saying this is all the same and they said "no no we want- we want this assigned to each school so we can go to any one of the schools and say "it says here . that by 2010 you're going to be able to do this and this "show me"

There is evidence here of subaltern agency where implementing involves convincing those in authority positions in the organization that implementation was straightforward, that it in fact only involved those in frontline administrative positions to simply call on someone within the organization who spoke Irish to deal with Irish queries. There is a sense not only of policy becoming watered down or diluted to accommodate local circumstances, but also a sense of agentive power over-simplifying the requirements in a local type i.e. the “really, all that is required here is/ all this means here is...” discourse marker to meet local agenda. This is clear evidence of the local actors engaged in the practice of over-simplifying. To achieve compliance, in her words, she puts the local interpretation “out to them”. In this way there is local appropriation and reclamation is legitimated:

So I met the principals of the schools which I would do in my role as officer anyway. I had monthly meetings with the principals in a group. I used to visit the schools too but as a group we met regularly and this is one of the things I put out to them that this is something that the school will have to comply with and again gave them an idea of what was suggested targets to them ehm () that was really straightforward because in a school all it meant that the school's secretary could call on somebody within the school who could deal with Irish . there is always an Irish teacher in the school

### *Policy as spatial practice*

Eventually the agent takes her power from the situation on the ground and comfortably approaches the Department of the Gaeltacht to inform how the policy is to be negotiated and implemented:

when I went through this with the Department of the Gaeltacht and kind of explained to them what I intended to set as targets for this s- the Head office that there would be somebody in each of the three departments and the general administration area who would be able to deal with queries in Irish . and that that would take time and that's how we would go about it .

The OLA therefore in this public organization is transformed through agency and eventually aligned to local practice and interpretation. The policy will be complied with, but will not be submissively implemented. The executive agency whose testimonial is described here acted unconsciously perhaps but entirely in accord with the space and locality in which she and her organization found themselves.

### **Conclusion**

One of the aims of this paper was to present and describe the notion of subaltern agency in language policy implementation and to show through a study of policy trajectory in a public education body that it plays a pivotal role in negotiation, diversification and appropriation of policy in local contexts. It was emphasized that the notion of subalterneity has been commonly used (most often) in post-colonial discourse to refer to individuals or groups who socially politically and geographically reside at the margins of or outside of a particular hegemonic power structure. In the context of implementation of a language in education policy, the term is harnessed here in a particular way to denote social actors who become the crucial agency that affects and shapes the way policy is eventually implemented. The subaltern voice is legitimated, not at the centre where policy is crafted and mandated but in the local space and in spatial practices. The subaltern agent is not acting consciously as a resistor to policy compliance in the local institution but acts entirely in accord with the space and locality with which s/he interacts. Drawing on Pennycook's (2010) notion of spatial turn and spatial practice, human behaviours and practices around implementation are analysed in relation to the space or locality in which they are constituted. Rather than being the backdrop or a neutral setting for implementation, the local is a central interactive part of the social and

behavioural. In tracing the trajectory of policy implementation of the OLA 2003 in a public education organization, this study has found evidence of local factors impacting on the approach adopted in policy implementation. The local spatial turns and practices of individual actors within this site commissioned with policy implementation on the ground shows on the way policy is interpreted and transformed. When it comes to policy implementation, the “archives of power” may not be solely at the centre, but can be found also in the local and the subaltern where even more powerful representations emerge, creating new “truths” that may in fact undermine existing conceptions.

## Endnotes

- 1) This paper is based on research funded nationally by the IRCHSS (Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences)
- 2) Transcription conventions:
 

|     |  |                   |                        |
|-----|--|-------------------|------------------------|
| =   | latching                                   | .                 | pause less than 1''    |
| :   | prolonged sound                            | ( )               | pause more than 1''    |
| -   | interruption (self- or other-interruption) | ?                 | question               |
| (X) | unclear speech                             | (comments)        | our notes              |
| [   | start of overlap                           | <u>underlined</u> | stressed word/syllable |

LOUD      louder voice  
XX Text removed to assure anonymity

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