Policy Implementation and Cognition: Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research

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The institution of the No Child Left Behind educational reform legislation has caused school systems nationwide to scramble as they seek to interpret and implement this vast policy initiative. As this legislation calls for more “intellectually demanding” content and pedagogy for everyone, the manner in which this policy is interpreted and implemented within our schools is of utmost concern.

This study addresses the manner in which public policy is interpreted by implementation agents, those state and local officials, administrators, and teachers who disseminate generalized policy into more concrete, everyday practice within schools. Specifically, the study focuses on the “sense-making” of policy by implementation agents and the cognitive structures, the situations, and the policy signals that influence the making of meaning by these agents. Evidence for this proposed cognitive framework is drawn from a variety of educational policy sources and via field notes and observations of science and mathematics classrooms.

Often, policy appears to become skewed in meaning and direction as it is passed from policymakers to those who are charged with its implementation. The first aspect of the proposed cognitive framework defends against the notion that policy is intentionally “sabotaged,” instead noting that the interpretation of policy is often subject to the educator’s existing knowledge and experiences. The idea that “people generate what they interpret” supports the idea that people view and interpret policy through their own cognitive schemas. Consequently, people “will construct different understanding,” leading to various degrees of analysis and implementation of the same policy. Additionally, lead educators charged with the implementation of policy often misinterpret new policy ideas as ones that are “essentially the same as the belief or practice that the teachers already hold.”

Additionally, the cognitive structure proposed by this study focuses on the “situation in which sense-making occurs.” As a teacher considers the aspects of instruction, learning, and schooling, his/her motivations and goals affect the interpretation of policy. This study notes, “one’s own experiences carry more weight in judgment and decision making than does abstract information.” Additionally, the process of implementing new reforms often implies that past reforms have been ineffective, thereby attributing to an additional loss of positive self-image on the part of the teacher. As the dimensions of teaching and learning encompass more than cognition, the implementation of policy is affected by “emotional practices” as well.

“Sense-making” and the implementation of policy are further dependent on the social contexts in which they seek to take part. In similar fashion to an individual’s personal schemas, the communities which policy potentially affects “bring insights and perspectives to the surface that otherwise might not be made visible.” The authors define this notion, citing how different groups of teachers at different grade levels interpret and implement policy in unlike manners. Additionally, implementing agents that group themselves together do not necessarily become more effective in interpreting policy as it was originally intended.

The implications for this cognitive framework of sense-making are extensive. First, some changes in the implementation process will require transformations in the cognitive processes of the implementation agents; this study outlines three such changes needed for more efficient implementation. These changes in cognition are outlined as reforms such as No Child Left Behind require teachers to “unlearn a considerable amount of what they already know and believe about instruction.” Additionally, policymakers face significant challenges as they move beyond offering rote goals and objectives as examples of intended policy in lieu of more defined and authentic models. This miscommunication between abstract principles and concrete classroom practice will have to be addressed. Finally, policy implementation hinges on the continued education of the implementation agents. Specifically, there is a need to achieve balance between helping agents recognize a need for new policy implementation and allowing them to feel autonomous and affirmed in their current practices.

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