Implementation of Social and Educational Policy: Teachers as Policy Implementers

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Abstract

This article provides a review of references on the implementation of social policy, focusing on educational policy, teachers in particular. In addition to playing a scientific role, as determined by their education, teachers are also public employees. As such, they often have to act as policy implementers in the classroom. An issue covered by policy implementation research is why policies are, or are not, successful when applied on the ground, in particular, why policies which are beneficial or positively accepted by professionals prove to be unsuccessful. This article proposes the introduction of new theoretical concepts in policy research, such as "construction of meaning". Our aim is to stress the significance of "meaning" and of the "action" of each policy implementer in the public sector.

Keywords: policy implementation, teachers, construction of meaning, symbolic interactionism.

1. Introduction

Researchers dealing with policy have recognized that the notion of "policy" is ambiguous (Legrant, 2012:331). Many have used the term "policy" with reference to policy texts, while others have used it with reference to common practices or expected processes, and yet others have used it to suggest an overall plan from problem recognition to policy evaluation. According to Ball (1993:10), this is one of the key problems of research, as the notion of policy is extensively used with reference to highly different things and meanings even in the same study. The meaning given to the term by each researcher will affect how he/she does the research and analyzes the results.

According to Canary (2010:24), *"policies are dynamic processes that include texts, practices and decisions that organize action across contexts. First, policies are created to regularize action; second, policies are socially constructed across multiple sites."*

2. Policy Implementation and the Implementers

Emphasis was placed on policy implementation as a research field primarily in the 1970s. This interest had its roots in the influence of a context for understanding a "policy process" which was called "policy cycle" by May & Wildasky (1978) or "stages heuristic" by Sabatier (1991). The following different steps can be identified in accordance with these stages: problem recognition, policy design and legalization, and implementation and evaluation. Although this model was heavily criticized for being oversimplified and was then abandoned, it is considered responsible for initiatives taken by researchers who developed the policy design, implementation and evaluation process (Sabatier, 2005:18). Program implementation relates to what happens in connection with a policy or program after it is designed.

The research by Pressman & Wildavsky in 1973 concerning federal job creation programs in the US established that the implementation phase of a program is a key obstacle to the attainment of desired goals,

thus pointing to the need for distinguishing design shortcomings from the ability or inability to implement programming goals (Mclaughlin, 2005:58; Ryan, 1995:65).

Modern researchers dealing with policy have stressed the lack of clarification of concepts and prospects which should respond to the complexity of the policy process. Policy research has moved from early top-down and later bottom-up phases to a third generation of policy research, with the imperative to recognize both institutional and individual factors that are involved in how policies are interpreted and implemented (Canary, 2010:25).

The basic idea of top-down policy implementation approaches is that implementation is the execution of a policy decision which is made at the top and then translates into clear guidelines to implementers at the bottom (Sabatier, 2005:19). It is based on the concept of a strong government which has been given an exclusive policy-making mandate. The implementers and the target group have no say in this.

According to Ryan (1995:67), these approaches affect such issues as: the formulation of legal principles, the exercise of control over the implementation environment and policy implementers, and the separation of policy from implementation. Top-down approaches have been heavily criticized. According to researchers, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the "center", i.e. on key policy decision-makers, while overlooking policy subsystems and other important actors in the implementation process, such as street-level bureaucrats, senior employees and program deliverers, thus underestimating their ability to modify or convert the policy. Also, implementation strategies are directly dependent upon how clear and precisely defined program goals are and on whether they are interpreted as designed.

According to Wildavsky & Pressman, the more the decision-making centers involved, the more inappropriate the implementation (Sabatier, 2005:21-22; Ryan, 1995:67-68; Sabatier, 1986:30-32).

Bottom-up policy implementation approaches were developed in contrast to top-down approaches.

Some of these approaches focused on street-level bureaucrats and on their importance in successful policy implementation. Interestingly, Lipsky argued that stress makes policy implementers develop day-to-day practices that ensure minimum implementation levels (Ladi & Dalakou, 2013).

Other approaches, such as Elmore's "reverse engineering", argued that starting from the final stage of the implementation process allows for having the desired results determined by the behavior, skills and sources of the local community of street-level bureaucrats (Sabatier, 2005:23-24, Ryan, 1995:68-69). Sabatier places particular emphasis on the analysis carried out by Hanf, Hiern & Porter (Sabatier, 2005:23, Sabatier, 1986:32), who focused on the interaction of several actors in the policy implementation process and on developing a suitable methodology for mapping the so-called "policy network".

The bottom-up advocates make a focus on the ability of local actors to reverse decisions made centrally and were criticized for diverting legal authority from elected policy makers.

They are criticized for not taking into account (in their analyses) such factors as limited resources for program financing, organizational restrictions and limitations, legal principles etc.

Finally, we should also mention the criticism which stresses that the dependence of bottom-up approaches on the views and values of implementers and policy beneficiaries leads to the view that the effectiveness of designed programs is limited considerably in relation to the attitude changes of the target groups (Sabatier, 2005:23-24, Sabatier, 1986:35).

3. Teachers as Policy Implementers

As regards in particular the research on the implementation of educational policies and programs, researchers have recognized that teachers as policy implementers are important players in educational policy. Studies have demonstrated that implementers do not always act as requested and do not always try to maximize the (official) goals of a policy (Coburn, 2001; Cohen & Ball, 1990; McLaughlin, 1987). Teachers have often been called "unreceptive to change" (resisting change) sometimes due to being merely lazy, when they have ignored or reversed proposed innovations (in particular in research relating to curriculum changes) (McLaughlin, 1987; Smitt, 2005).

In contrast, Spillane (1996, 2000) expressed the general view — in research on the principal's role in implementing innovations and programs at school and on the implementation of change in teaching mathematics — that the failure of a policy is not always due to its being rejected by the teachers, but is merely related to its being understood differently by its designers (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002:419). Another research found that teachers often adopt an active attitude towards a specific policy on the ground, and their practice tends to re-formulate the designers' proposals to make them fit into their own social and professional context. Through day-to-day practice in the school community, teachers understand the meaning and impact of each policy on their work and respond accordingly (Spillane, et al, 1996:431).

According to Han & Weiss (2005:668), who studied the implementation of uptake programs in education, the factors that affect the implementation of such programs are: the principal's support, the teacher's own perception of his/her skills, the level of professional burnout, the teacher's understanding of how acceptable the program is to the school community, the compatibility of program goals with the teacher's personal beliefs about student behavior, and finally the pre-implementation expectations about the effectiveness of a program.

Similar conclusions were reached by Wang & Cheng (2005), who stated that failure to implement policies as initially designed is linked to the teachers' uncertainty about their results and their view that the new practices are not as good as the previous ones. In looking into how policy interacts with the educational practice in the classroom, Silver & Skuja Steele (2005) looked into English language courses in 5 countries and found that teachers, despite being aware of the innovation that should be implemented, placed the emphasis on other priorities and student needs. Their analysis demonstrated that language-related policies were re-interpreted and had a direct impact on the educational practices. That is, change is affected and/or mitigated by the contextual factors.

Researchers have discussed the roadblocks to policy implementation in day-to-day practice and/or the causes of failure of that implementation (Spillane, et al., 2002). Following is a summary of the roadblocks identified: the lack of clear understanding by teachers of the innovation they are supposed to implement, the lack of appropriate knowledge and skills which are necessary for adopting an innovation, the absence of necessary education material, the incompatibility between the organizational conditions and the proposed policy, the absence of motivation among staff, the teachers' prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences, the different meanings and interpretations of policies themselves and the incorrect or superficial understanding of such policies (Wang, 2008), as well as the fact that designers tend to ignore hidden or obvious contextual processes and dimensions.

Research studies have indicated that researchers have been looking constantly into whether failure to implement policies and programs or implementing them in a way other than that proposed is primarily associated with the individuals and the meanings they give to that implementation, or the implementation context, or both.

4. Conclusion: Construction of Meaning: An Overlooked Concept?
Construction of meaning, i.e. the giving of meaning to objects by individuals is a key concept in symbolic interactionism, and according to Blumer it is a parameter that has been ignored in sociology and psychology theories on the formulation of the behavior and action of individuals. However, besides its self-explanatory importance in understanding human action in symbolic interactionism, construction of meaning focuses on the source of the meaning, on its formulation process. The meaning given to an object results from human interactionism, i.e. a social process. Meaning as a social creation is not meant to be stationary. An individual gives meaning to objects and to his/her action through a process of interpretation.

According to Blumer, symbolic interactionism is based on three assumptions: (a) individuals determine their action in relation to things by giving meaning to these things; (b) the meaning given by the individuals to the things stems from social interactionism, i.e. communication between individuals; and (c) the meaning can be modified via a process of interpretation on the part of the individual (Blumer, 1969:2).

The key concept of symbolic interactionism, which is linked both to the giving of meaning to objects and the formulation of the subjects' action, is social interactionism. Through social interactionism, an individual gives

meaning to the objects in relation to which he/she also formulates his/her action. Symbolic interactionism maintains that "the worlds" that exist for individuals and their groups are composed of "objects". According to Blumer there are three categories of objects: "(a) physical objects, such as chairs, trees, or bicycles; (b) social objects, such as students, a president, a mother, or a friend, an (c) abstract objects, such as moral principles, philosophical doctrines, or ideas such as justice, exploration, or compassion" (Blumer, 1969:10). Blumer also states that an object can have different meanings for different individuals. For example, a tree can have different meanings for a botanist, a gardener or a poet.

Common meanings are given to objects by a group of human beings who perceive them in a similar way. When created through interactionism, objects are social creations. It is through this process that the environment, i.e. the surroundings of human beings, is formed. Human group life is a process in which individuals formulate, maintain and transform the objects in their world, and give meanings to them. The meanings of objects are maintained through the definitions given to them by the individuals. Therefore, any object can be altered, which will change its meaning (Blumer, 1969:12). "Joint action" is formed through a common meaning. Blumer cites the following examples of joint actions: a family dinner, a marriage ceremony, a debate, a court trial or a war. The daily lives of people and the human society consist of different forms of joint actions.

In view of the above, each policy which a teacher is called upon to implement is an "object" to which teachers give meaning. The educational process can be viewed as a "joint action" and the school environment is a "world" which is totally distinct from other worlds. Consequently, the meanings given by teachers to these objects could be looked into through interactionism with themselves or with others (colleagues and/or students).

Based on Blumer's view, we feel that the implementation of an educational policy or program on the ground consists in blending and interconnecting the actions organized and carried out by teachers. Introducing such a reasoning can both alter policy research and explain why policies are, or are not, successful on the ground, as we, researchers, could be able to understand the individual and collective action of human beings by understanding a teacher's "world".

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A Brief Author Biography

Dr Lempesi Georgia Eleni is a social worker. She has worked as a social worker in general and special education. In 2010 she received a Master's Degree in School Failure and Social Exclusion from the University of Patras, Greece. In 2017 she completed her Ph.D. in Education titled "Educational and social policy transfer in Europe: the case of projects about gender issues in Greek schools". From 2010 to 2014 she taught in the Department of Social Work in the Technological Institute of Patras. She also taught in the Department of Education and Social Work, University of Patras, Greece (former Pedagogical Department of Primary Education) during the academic years 2017-2018, 2018-2019 as a Contract Academic Staff. Her research interests are related to social and educational policy, gender issues, European policies and social work in education.