*Educational Policy Theory and Practice: Designing Comprehensive Frameworks
for Evaluating and Managing Changing Educational Environments*

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The Asian Conference on Education 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Educational institutions at all levels of the education system can make positive
contributions to social change in global society by effectively bridging the gap
between educational theory and practice to create optimum learning environments and
outcomes for students. A clear understanding of educational policy theories and
practices can allow educational policy makers to design effective frameworks for
evaluating and addressing major factors affecting education systems, including social
norms, political pressures, and other key variables (Plaut, 2003). School leaders may
view educational policy through an ideological, organizational, political, or practical
lens and analyze and interpret educational policies employing positivistic or
interpretive theories. Positivist theories employ a scientific approach in examining the
structural aspects of organizations, systems, and the relationships between specific
interest groups, while interpretive theories may be more ideological in nature and
view reality as a social construct rather than as an objective form of absolute truth
(Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Educational policy theory can form the basis of
sound management decisions and classroom practices, leading to coherent and
effective educational programs and systems. Multiple dimensions and theories can
provide school leaders with new insights and perspectives on various aspects of
educational policy. Policy evaluation helps to improve educational effectiveness by
systematically examining the structure of the curriculum, instruction, assessment
processes, and the benefits to stakeholders (Diamond, 1997). Evaluative frameworks
based on educational policy theory can add clarity to the evaluation and management
of complex and evolving social, political, and educational environments in the era of
globalization.

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Introduction: Policy Theory and Practice

Educational policy theories, assessment theories, teaching practices and methodologies can exert a positive impact on teaching and learning outcomes. To educate effectively for change in a rapidly evolving social, political, economic, and technological global environment, it is first necessary to identify clearly and to understand the key factors related to change and to respond with a coherent, comprehensive approach. Educational institutions at all levels of the education system can contribute to social change in contemporary global society by effectively bridging the gap between theory and practice to create optimum learning environments and outcomes for students. A clear understanding of educational policy theories and practices can allow educational policy makers to create an effective framework for policy review to conduct a periodic, systematic analysis of major factors affecting education systems, including social norms, political pressures, and other key variables (Plaut, 2003). Educational policy theory can form the basis of sound management decisions and classroom practices, leading to coherent and effective educational programs and systems. Evaluative frameworks based on educational policy theory can help to add clarity to complex and evolving social and political environments in an interconnected and rapidly evolving international society in the era of globalization.

Continuous philosophical enquiry and deep self-reflection serve to develop and enhance educational theory which influences policy-making decisions (Kazepides, 1994). Administrators and policy makers can draw on a wide range of disciplines and schools of thought to deepen awareness of different possibilities and to improve decision-making processes. School leaders may view educational policy through a normative (ideological), structural (organizational), constituentive (political), or technical (practical) lens and analyze and interpret educational policies employing positivistic or interpretive theories (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Positivist theories employ a scientific approach in examining the structural aspects of organizations, systems, and the relationships between specific interest groups. Interpretive theories may be more ideological in nature and treat reality as a social construct rather than as a purely objective form of absolute truth (Sandra, 2001). Multiple dimensions and theories can provide school leaders with new insights and perspectives on various aspects of educational policy. Policy evaluation helps to improve educational effectiveness by systematically examining the structure of the curriculum, instruction, assessment processes, and the benefits to stakeholders.

Applying the Four Dimensions of Policy Theory to Educational Policy Evaluation

Educational policy makers may apply the four dimensions of policy theory to policy evaluation by using a wide range of different approaches. Ideological, organizational, political, and practical dimensions of policy theory can provide valuable new perspectives in the analysis of complex environments. In addition, positivist and interpretive approaches and theories can also enhance policy evaluation. Positivist approaches to the formulation of policies are scientific and primarily quantitative in nature, while interpretive approaches to policymaking include feminist theory, ideological theories, critical theory, and postmodernism and may question the status quo (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Interpretive forms of analysis address complex, interrelated social and psychological factors. An overreliance on positivism

and easily measurable factors in policy making may lead to an oversimplification of complex and diverse social contexts (Lees, 2007). Interpretive theories help to improve and change policy making by challenging conventional wisdom, values, beliefs, traditions, established facts, and systems in society. Critical thinking and the questioning of belief systems are key elements of interpretive approaches to teacher training and educational policy evaluation (Sandra, 2001). An increased awareness of personal belief systems and willingness to change can lead to improvements in educational policy. The application of multiple frameworks in the detailed analysis of challenging issues is essential in the formulation of coherent, relevant, and effective educational policy (Hills & Gibson, 1992). The careful, objective consideration of multiple perspectives and viewpoints in the educational policy decision-making process can lead to important changes and modifications.

Ideology can exert a strong influence on educational policy and on the design, content, and goals of curricula. The ideological dimension of policy theory addresses such fundamental factors as basic beliefs, fundamental values, and the influence of ideology on educational policy (Honig & Hatch, 2004). An ideological dimension in the formulation and review of policy theory assists policy makers in identifying underlying assumptions that shape educational policy. Self-reflection and critical thinking can allow policy makers to examine ideological influences in an objective manner and to make choices which benefit all stakeholders.

The organizational dimension of policy theory encompasses the structures and different levels within organizations and institutions (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). The specific structure of an organization may significantly influence the decision-making process within an organization. Neoinstitutional theory examines the roles of specific institutions in shaping the decision-making process within a wider system (Cooper et al., 2004). Viewing a system as a collection of interrelated institutions with unique structures and organizational cultures enhances the analysis and understanding of inputs and outputs in a system. In addition to examining the relations between the individual components of an organization, the overall system needs to be considered as a complex, functioning unit with unique properties.

The political dimension relates to the political nature of organizations and the relations between specific groups in society. The political dimension of policy analysis includes elite groups such as educational leaders at the district, state, and federal level in addition to gender and ethnic groups and average citizens (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Demographic factors often play an important role in the decision-making processes of schools. Schools operate in an open system and need to be able to respond to changes in the surrounding environment to meet the needs of all stakeholders. The neopluralist advocacy coalition theory recognizes the importance of various interest groups, the political nature of human systems, and the effects of interaction between groups within a system (Cooper et al., 2004). An understanding of the structure and nature of groups within institutions may be as important as an understanding of the structure of institutions. Coherence in educational policy requires the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders. Various groups of constituents can make significant contributions to the formulation of successful policies by providing suggestions and regular quantitative and qualitative data to improve the curriculum and operation of schools (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Effective school leaders and policy makers address the needs of internal and external

constituents, including teachers, students, parents, community members, business leaders, and various levels of government (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Shared leadership within schools and regular input from community members, families, and the local business community may help to improve the effectiveness of the curriculum and increase support for schools. Ray, Candoli, and Hack (2005) note the importance of voluntary decision-making processes and the active involvement of multiple constituents in the management of schools.

The practical dimension of policy theory includes the various planning stages, implementation, and evaluation processes involved in educational policy (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Systems theory, related to the technical dimension of policy theory, attempts to quantify, measure, and predict the results of inputs and outputs in a system interacting with the surrounding environment (Cooper et al., 2004). Inaccurate or incomplete data and potential lurking variables may be present despite the appearance of control in systems theory, amplifying and perpetuating flawed formulas and resulting negative consequences. Systems theory and various network models developed in the business sector can be applied to school management, projects, and the development of educational policies (Ray, Candoli, & Hack, 2005). Although some elements of business design and management may create benefits in schools, educational theory should remain the cornerstone of educational policy decisions.

Improving the Curriculum by Using Policy Evaluation

School leaders need to clearly define and state the goals and objectives of the curriculum, instruction, and methods of assessment to avoid uncertainty among teachers that may cause resistance to educational policies (Diamond, 1997). In the United States, some local, state, and federal rules, regulations and laws have created a complex educational, administrative, and legal environment for school leaders. Mandated change may sometimes result in disappointing or mixed results in such a complex system. Learning may not be linear and sequential, progressing in an orderly and predictable fashion (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Educational policy based on data collected from a variety of sources, stored electronically, and contrasted and compared in different ways can help to improve the curriculum. Some curricula and courses at colleges and universities do not specifically state learning outcomes and significant gaps may exist between stated goals and teaching practices (Diamond, 1997). Policy evaluation can serve to identify problems in the curriculum and to coordinate appropriate responses. Professional development for instructors can lead to significant curriculum improvements (Diamond, 1997). Emphasizing the importance of professional development and educational technology in educational policy making can serve to improve the curriculum.

Improving Instruction by Using Policy Evaluation

Cooper, Fusarelli, and Randall (2004) maintain that some of the policies of teacher unions may be incompatible in some cases with the professional standards and goals of teaching. Some teachers seem to desire that teaching be elevated to the level of a profession but choose to belong to unions with goals and agendas that may prevent teaching from being viewed as a profession. Site-based management approaches may conflict with the desire of teacher unions to negotiate contracts that address a wide

range of concerns equally across an entire school district (Ray, Candoli, & Hack, 2005). The conflict between site-based management, a key element in ongoing educational reform, and the expectations and demands of teacher unions poses a significant challenge to school leaders and administrators. Highly educated professionals need and desire higher levels of autonomy (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Increased levels of autonomy for teachers may help to improve the quality of classroom instruction. Educational technology can significantly enhance curriculum design, classroom, instruction, and assessment (Huba & Freed, 2000). Policy evaluation can help to identify best practices to improve classroom instruction.

Improving Assessment by Using Policy Evaluation

Policy makers can improve the educational evaluation process in a variety of ways. Building a consensus and involving all stakeholders can enhance the evaluation process (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). A wide range of assessment methods can be employed with the support and cooperation of multiple stakeholders. The vision of a school leader and guiding coalition may facilitate the planning and implementation of changes to align the curriculum, instruction, and assessment within an educational institution (Diamond, 1997). Parents, students, and community members can contribute information and suggestions to improve the accuracy and fairness of educational evaluation. Proposed measures for improvement resulting from the evaluation process must be adequate and related to student learning outcomes (Cooper et al., 2004). School leaders and teachers can use different forms of evaluation such as learner journals, focus groups, student and teacher end-of-course surveys, and analyses of community projects managed by students.

School leaders can employ best practices in educational evaluation employed by different schools and districts (Ray, Candoli, & Hack, 2005). Regional and national guidelines can provide a flexible framework for effective educational evaluation practices that policy makers and school leaders can compare in a clear and meaningful way. Summative and formative evaluation processes for school leaders, instructors, and students may employ a variety of approaches, including student surveys, portfolios, interviews, peer observations and feedback, self-evaluations, formal examinations, and tests (Diamond, 1997). Quantitative and qualitative research can be used to identify areas in need of improvement, and the data from such research can be used to demonstrate the need for improvements and possible benefits. Shared leadership can enhance the evaluation process (Ray et al., 2005). Individual teachers and students can set personal goals and objectives in addition to goals for an educational institution.

School leaders can measure progress in a variety of ways using quantitative and qualitative data. The evaluation process can create new learning opportunities for teachers and students. Tracking by ability may have a negative impact on some students and limit some learning opportunities (Ansalone, 2004). An effective accountability system assesses schools, administrators, teachers, and students using a multilayered system of accountability. Policy evaluation can identify the strengths and weaknesses in the assessment process and help to create an effective and supportive community of learning in which assessment creates new learning opportunities for all participants.

Conclusion

Policy makers can contrast and compare positivist and interpretive theories of education policy making, applying an ideological, organizational, political, or practical lens to evaluate educational policy and to improve educational effectiveness (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). The four dimensions of policy theory can help school leaders to analyze and interpret different elements of educational policy from a wide range of perspectives. Policy evaluation enhances the effectiveness of education by systematically reviewing the curriculum, instruction, and assessment processes and the implications for internal and external constituents.

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