**TRANSFORMING EDUCATION**
Insights from the study of public policy implementation

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Education is a vital public interest and a major focus of governmental action, indeed the most important investment that nations make in equipping children and young people to flourish in a rapidly changing world. There is a widespread and growing view that many existing systems of education are falling short in this objective and accordingly that education needs not only to be reformed but transformed. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal - calling on governments to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education...for all' - specifies three axes as key to this transformation. Many civil society advocates are focusing especially on the need for an 'inclusive system of education at all levels'.
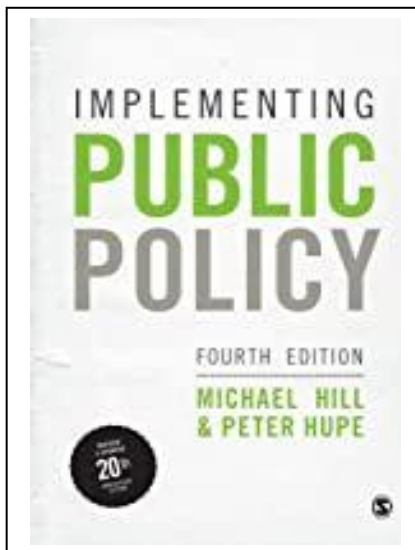
These are big challenges. As an UNESCO report puts this, implementing the message that every child matters and matters equally will likely require changes in thinking and practice at every level of the education system, from classroom teachers and others who provide educational experiences directly, to those responsible for national policy. It seems likely therefore that our understanding of what is involved in changing education can be illuminated by the extensive social science literature on government and the policy-making process, especially perhaps the part of this discipline concerned with Implementing Public Policy.

*A new edition of a major English-language textbook with this title (**IPP** for short, sub-title 'An Introduction to the Study of Operational Governance') was published in 2022 (by Michel Hill & Peter Hupe). Part I of the notes that follow draw heavily on my reading of this book.*

Part I There is a conventional notion that policy and implementation are separate and sequential processes in government...and indeed that implementation is a relatively straightforward 'top down' process of delivering on policy goals formulated centrally. This notion is important: it links to a simple conception of *democratic legitimacy* in which the public elect political leaders and parliaments; these make policies and pass laws; and the government bureaucracy then acts (directly or through others) to realise the policy intention. Both the public and politicians may still, in part at least, continue to hold this view: indeed the latter may be tempted to complain that policy 'failures' - of which there are many - are typically the fault of implementers. It has also informed much research, including the classic 1973 study by Pressman and Wildasky (*Implementation*).

However the thrust of **IPP** is to suggest that much experience challenges this conventional 'top down' view of the stages in the policy process. Instead the authors offer a more open-minded approach that encourages us to see policy and action as a continuum and the policy process as involving an often complex range of activities by multiple actors at various levels that produce (or fail to produce) outputs that may, or may not deliver desired outcomes (and in which different stakeholders may have different ideas of what *is* desirable). Attending to this complexity offers us an informed basis for seeking to better realise important societal goals.

Some common aspects of this complexity can be stated more precisely:

- 'Policy' is itself complicated. Often a particular policy is located in a set of related matters that may have been addressed over a long time period. Its current expression may be located in an array of documents and agreements. Laws may be more tightly expressed through the legislative process but may also require more detailed guidance on what they mean in practice, which in turn may be given fresh definition if tested in the courts. Moreover in a field like education, there are likely to be many policies that impact on each other, not necessarily cumulatively. And of course, what emerges as policy may have involved negotiation among different interests that introduce compromises and ambiguities that need further interpretation by those involved in delivery.
- Government is often not unitary. Typically there may also be regional and local levels of democratic government that also engage in policy-making. Even where there are no other democratic layers, there may be separate entities (local offices of central government) and separate delivery agencies (like schools) which don't just 'implement' policies: first they have to interpret them in the light of the way people at this level understand the local situation and take account of different local interests.
- Beyond this, staff on the front line (e.g. who meet the public) like teachers are themselves 'policy-makers' in the sense that they have significant autonomy in deciding what they actually do in their class-rooms. Indeed, following Lipsky (1980) there is a substantial literature exploring how these 'street-level bureaucrats' (in many fields of practice) cope with the pressures they experience, including from policy, so as to make their work lives satisfactory.

To varying degrees then, depending on the nature of the policy area, the structure of government, the way delivery is organised etc., the policy process involves action through complex multi-agency systems, involving many actors - often with different interests - and impacted by a potentially wide range of variables. This certainly applies to education. **IPP** commends therefore more comprehensive approaches (hinted at in the book's subtitle) to understanding this process (or better, these processes) that seek to grapple with this complexity.

Of course, this could easily mean being overwhelmed by the number of variables and their relationships but the literature does suggest some further themes that may be important in relation to education policy. Here are four:

- The conventional approach focuses on government, certainly in its 'implementation' activities, as a bureaucracy in which action is controlled by hierarchical instruction and rule-following. There are certainly bureaucracies in government but this is not the only form of organising. There may also be markets (or quasi-markets) in which governmental control of separate delivery agencies is managed through contracts and performance review. There may be several agencies in a particular policy area or geographical zone that impact on each other's work and achieve coordination through 'horizontal' negotiation, relying on finding shared interests. And relevant action may depend on people whose work may be shaped by professional goals and standards, established by associations of these people themselves.
- Government and other agencies may vary in their internal cultures, for example in the extent to which they emphasise routine and consistency on the one hand or innovation and dynamism on the other.
- The outcomes sought or delivered through the policy process may in reality be co-produced with the citizens affected by the policy. Education is a good example: what students learn depends on the nature of their participation in the formal education process and their experience in their families and the wider community. It depends on partnership.
- Rather less visible in **IPP** is the literature, notably the work of Henry Mintzberg, focused on *strategy/strategic change* in complex systems and related work on organisations as *learning systems* (for example, Attwood and others *Leading Change*). We can add further insights from this wider work on management and organisation. In situations of considerable complexity, strategies can emerge though a host of processes, some intended, some spontaneous, and certainly not all controlled from the 'top'. Understanding the policy process needs attention to both the 'whole system' of relevance to possible outputs/outcomes and the ways in which learning (i.e. organisational learning) takes place throughout this system.

Part I References
- Attwood, M., Peddler, P., Pritchard, S., and Wilkinson, D. *Leading Change: A guide to whole systems working* Policy Press, 2003
- **Hill, M. & Hupe. P. *Implementing Public Policy* (Sage, 2022)**
- Lipsky, M. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (Sage, 1980)
- Mintzberg H. & Jorgensen J. *Emergent strategy for public policy* (Canadian Public Administration vo. 3- No. 2 pp214 -229, Summer 1987)
- Pressman, J.L. and Wildavsky, A. *Implementation* (University of California Press, 1973)

Part II What might this mean for leading change in education?

The second part of these notes draws on this literature and my own studies* of national and local efforts to advance quality and inclusive education to identify some prescriptions on the <u>processes</u> *involved in shaping transformational change in education.*

If our interest is in *understanding* transformation....or indeed *influencing* these processes, whether as policy leaders, civil society advocates or perhaps as engaged researchers, we can draw from the brief summary above and wider experience of the education sector, at least the following nine prescriptions:

1. Take a strategic approach to addressing the challenge of transformation

Starting from the last point (above), we have seen that radical change in complex multi-agency systems is unlikely to be a simple 'top-down' process initiated through centrally formulated 'policy': rather it implies a strategic approach that orchestrates a common sense of direction, addresses the whole system of relevance, welcomes the diversity of perspectives and contributions, fosters a variety of innovation and seeks to shape and reshape action through learning from experience.

2. Strive to achieve clarity of purpose

However 'policy' (i.e. law, policy statements and related resource commitments) and the way information about these is widely communicated still have important functions in these change processes insofar as these:

- o Give high salience (priority) to some activities in the face of other policies and pressures;
- o Offer a coherent vision to guide the direction of travel;
- o Increasingly ensure different contributions to change are working cumulatively;
- o Sustain this focus over the time periods required to deliver real change 'on the ground'.

3. Mobilise leadership throughout the system with the authority, commitment and capacity to promote positive change.

Clearly different levels of government and different delivery agencies have different parts to play in whole-system transformation: for example, we are likely to need governmental agencies that create the conditions for positive change; and

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local leadership that can shape the way that local educational resources address changing population needs and ensure continuity in the experience of students through their educational careers; and school leadership that enables each school to advance its journey towards transformation.

4. Ensure that civil society interests are partners in the change process at all levels.

Formal education is a major 'service' to society. Civil society associations have a valid role, on behalf of the wider public, in shaping this service. Moreover formal education is intertwined with informal education (from family and the wider community) in creating the educational experience of learners. Nationally, law creates obligations but it may also create rights for students and families. Locally and at the level of the school, teachers, students and families are potentially partners in delivering education. A whole system strategy needs to recognise these connections and create processes at each level for productive engagement.

5. Use appropriate levers for promoting change with and through different elements in this whole system.

As we have seen the whole system relevant to educational transformation includes different elements and different interests. The relationships between these different elements are not only hierarchical and bureaucratic.

If students and families have rights and are partners in co-producing education, this represents 'bottom-up' pressure on the education system. To the extent that teachers (and other professional workers) exercise some autonomy, an important influence on them will be the investments made in valuing their professionalism and developing their pedagogical skills. Some agencies in the system (notably but not only private schools) may be influenced by market (or quasi-market) incentives. And some agencies (like schools serving the same population) may be in a 'horizontal' relationship that requires coordination based on mutual accommodation.

Change strategies need to make judicious use of these different ways of influencing action.

6. Give priority to investing in the recruitment and retention of teachers and developing their pedagogical practice.

Good teachers and effective approaches to learning are the critical element in every student's success. Good schools need to provide direction and support for what teachers do and ensure their access to continuous professional development as well as to other kinds of professional expertise and experience.

7. Promote a culture that welcomes educational innovation.

Some aspects of the education system are likely to be conservative, in the sense of trying to ensure that 'we do things like we always did them'. In these situations, proposed changes may often be absorbed into 'business as usual'. Transformation, on the other hand requires innovation that provides the seeds of a radically different way of doing things.....and helps these seeds to grow and spread. Leadership for transformation is about creating the conditions where many people feel able to test out ways of doing things differently.

8. Attend to the processes and conditions that make innovation sustainable.

Transformation implies radical change and where this is achieved, we can expect this not to be an 'end point' but rather the base on which to build more incremental processes of continuous improvement. However innovation (like that sometimes achieved through school-focused 'projects') itself will be fragile unless the new ways of working can be made self-sustaining (for example, through investment in mutual aid networks, enabling leadership and the development of organisational cultures that embody the new vision - 'this is now the way things are done round here') while the wider systems of which the innovation is part ensure that policy and management reinforce the new ways of working.

9. Make the education system a learning system.

Returning then to the first of these requirements, a strategic approach to change in a complex system with many challenges and uncertainties requires that the education system itself is able to learn and develop: that it becomes a learning system. 'Vertically', this means creating 'safe spaces' and processes that enable leaders in different parts of the system to be able to see something of the 'whole picture' so that they can relate their own contributions to emerging goals. 'Laterally', it means creating forums and processes so that countries, localities and schools can learn from each other's experience. Both 'vertical' and 'lateral' learning may benefit from investment in independent vehicles (for example, based in Universities) to facilitate learning exchange.

Our efforts to achieve positive and sustainable change in education, especially on a large scale, need to be informed by these insights.

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