



The impact of school policy and stakeholders' actions on student learning: A longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a theoretical framework on how school policy can promote student learning. School policy is considered to have an indirect effect on student achievement by changing school stakeholders' actions toward improving the School Learning Environment (SLE) and teaching practice. A reciprocal relationship between school policy and stakeholders' actions is also considered. A longitudinal study was conducted to test the framework's main assumptions. A stratified sample of 64 primary schools was selected and students' achievement in Mathematics at the beginning of Grade 4 and at the end of the next three consecutive school years was measured, alongside the school policy and teachers' actions with regards to issues associated with teaching and the SLE. The results of multilevel structural equation modelling analyses supported the main assumptions of the framework. Implications for the development of school policy are drawn and suggestions for further research are provided.

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1. Introduction

It is fundamentally important for each organization to develop policy which connects its vision and goals to internal operations. The term *policy* refers to a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organization or individual (Cohen & Hill, 2001). Given that schools can be seen as complex organizations, they are expected to propose a set of actions that school stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, and parents) should follow to promote student learning. This set of actions is captured in official documents published by the school management team to designate roles of different stakeholders in the well-functioning of the school both inside and outside the classroom. School policy is also reflected in various documents issued periodically by the school management

team, such as the minutes of the teaching staff meetings and announcements or guidelines sent to teachers and/or parents through regular mail or posted on the web.

Many scholars discuss the importance of establishing effective school policies which may have an effect on improving student learning outcomes (Hattie, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2014). Schools are seen as the “basic unit of change and school educators (teachers and principals) are not only the agents, but also the initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts” (Smith & O'Day, 1991, p. 235). Spillane (2005) argues that local school systems are more than mere implementers of top-down educational policies. Schools should be allowed to respond to national policy initiatives by developing and adopting their own distinct policies (Flessa, 2012). The main assertion is that increasing schools' authority and flexibility will allow for the development of better and more effective educational processes which are more likely to correspond to local needs. School stakeholders are better aware of their school needs and may therefore be more able to direct effort, resources, and educational processes more efficiently to meet them (Nir & Ben Ami, 2005).

Despite the importance of policy development at the school level, the overall emphasis in the research literature has been focused on policy-making at the state and national levels (e.g.,

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Cohen & Hill, 2001; Honig, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Less is known about the efforts of schools to create and implement policies to support student learning (Datnow, 2006; Duke et al., 2008). The results of two meta-analyses (i.e., Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou, & Demetriou, 2010; Scheerens, Seidel, Witziers, Hendriks, & Doornekamp, 2005) reveal that, although schools are expected to develop their own policies to improve the learning environment and teaching practice, school policy has a small direct effect on student achievement. In addition, secondary PISA analyses show that variables measuring school policy do not predict variation in student outcomes (Maslowski, Scheerens, & Luyten, 2007).

This paper argues that there is a need to establish a theoretical framework to understand the impact of school policy on student learning and guide the design of studies intended to investigate its effects. Most studies investigating the relationship between school policy and student achievement are cross-sectional (Hattie, 2009; Kyriakides et al., 2010). Although such studies were able to identify small correlations between school policy and student achievement, their results may underestimate the impact of school policy on changing the actions of school stakeholders (Land, 2002). Thus, a framework developed to understand the impact of school policy is proposed in the next section. This framework is based not only on educational effectiveness theories (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008; Scheerens, 2013) but also on the results of empirical studies investigating the impact of school policy on student learning outcomes (e.g., Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010; Lüftenegger et al., 2012). Using this framework, a longitudinal study measuring school policy and teachers' actions over time was conducted. Although the study is concerned with the potential impact of school policy on a specific group of stakeholders (i.e., teachers), the data emerging from this study can help us test two assumptions of this framework. Thus the main results of this study are presented, and suggestions for research to test additional elements of this framework and to investigate the impact of school policy on other groups of stakeholders (e.g., students and parents) are provided.

2. A theoretical framework to explore the impact of school policy and stakeholders' actions on student achievement

In this section, we outline the main assumptions of a theoretical framework developed to explain how and under what conditions school policy may have an impact on student achievement. The first assumption, which is supported by various effectiveness studies (see Reynolds et al., 2014) posits that there are many factors associated with student achievement which operate at four different levels: the student, classroom, school, and system levels.

Second, the framework places emphasis on two overarching factors concerned with the school policy and the actions taken to improve: (a) teaching and (b) the school learning environment (SLE). The importance of these two overarching factors is emphasized by studies investigating the impact of school factors on student achievement (e.g., Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2014). While organizational aspects of schools provide the necessary preconditions for effective teaching, it is the quality of teacher–student interactions that principally determines student progress (Fauth, Decristan, Rieser, Klieme, & Büttner, 2014). Thus, school policy and stakeholders' actions are expected to have mainly indirect effects on student learning outcomes through improving the quality of teaching at the classroom level and the SLE.

Third, the framework assumes that the impact of school policy depends on the extent to which stakeholders implement the policy guidelines. This is based on research suggesting that viewing implementation failure as a result of poor policy clarity neglects the complexity of human-sense making processes consequential to

implementation (Spillane, 2005). For example, a school may develop a clear policy on partnership, which includes the involvement of parents in teaching. However, not all teachers may be persuaded to implement this policy, especially if they believe that parental involvement may jeopardize their professional autonomy (Fan & Chen, 2001). This implies that stakeholders' actions may have a direct impact on improving the SLE and teaching practice, whereas school policy may have an indirect impact by changing stakeholders' actions.

Fourth, it is assumed that there is a reciprocal relationship between school policy and school stakeholders' actions. It is expected that changes in school policy may have an impact on changing the actions of school stakeholders. At the same time, it is also possible that the stakeholders' actions might influence school policies by stressing the need for changing the policy to address current stakeholders' needs (Knapp, 1997; Talbert, 2002). To illustrate this reciprocal relationship, consider student absenteeism. A new school leadership team appointed in a school with student absenteeism problems might develop a policy on student absenteeism to ensure that it is minimized. This move indicates the direct impact that a change in policy might have on changing stakeholders' actions. In contrast, in schools where the greatest majority of students regularly attend school, there is no need to develop such a policy. This illustrates the effect of the stakeholders' actions on setting or changing school policies. As a whole, this example suggests that cross-sectional studies cannot help identify such changes as those discussed above, either in school policies or in stakeholders' actions. Longitudinal studies, in contrast, have the potential to empirically test this assumption because they enable tracing changes either in policy or in actions.

Finally, the framework assumes that school policy has a situational effect on student achievement implying that its impact may vary depending on the current situation of the school under investigation (Goodson, McGee, & Cashman, 1989). This situational character of school policy suggests that in developing the school policy, school leaders should take into account the abilities and readiness of those who are expected to implement it (Cohen & Hill, 2001). For example, take a school that originally had no immigrant students from a particular country and had to teach a Geography lesson on that country mainly by using secondary sources of information (e.g., books, internet). When immigrants from that country join the student population, the school can invite the parents of these students to talk about their country.

The proposed framework that encompasses these assumptions is illustrated in Figure 1. This figure demonstrates that the framework is multilevel in nature and refers to factors situated at the school, classroom, and student level. It also supports that quality of teaching at the classroom level has a direct impact on student achievement. Emphasis is placed on the role of school policy in influencing indirectly both teaching and the SLE. Therefore the framework is concerned with the impact that a change in school policy (over a period of time) may have on changing the actions of stakeholders and through that on improving the teaching and the SLE.

Three elements of school policy are considered. First, it is expected that school policy should clarify all stakeholders' role in improving learning (Cohen & Hill, 2001). When the school policy is clear, the stakeholders are more likely to judge its recommendations and decide whether it is worth making the effort to change their actions (Land, 2002). Second, the framework assumes that in introducing a school policy, the skills and the willingness of school stakeholders should be taken into account (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). If a certain policy expects stakeholders to undertake roles they do not have the skills to perform or they strongly oppose to, it is unlikely that the policy will be implemented effectively. The third

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