

(Re)thinking the Adoption of Inclusive Education Policy in Ontario Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to advance a proposal for the analysis of how inclusive education policies in Ontario schools are adopted. In particular, I use the notion of *Policy Enactment* to re-conceptualize the processes of putting inclusive education policies into practice. The argument is that the traditional *implementation* model to analyze the adoption of inclusive education policies devalues the significant role of context in both policy analysis research and practice. Analyzing education policies based on the construct of *enactment* offers a context-informed approach that can help policy actors and researchers to better understand how inclusive education policies are incorporated into practices. The paper concludes that a policy enactment perspective empowered by the constructs of Neo-Institutionalism theory is a more robust tool for analyzing inclusive education policies as their translation is far from being a mere upfront conversion of text into action.

Keywords: inclusive education policy, implementation, enactment, context, Ontario schools, policy actors, practice, policy analysis

Introduction

Despite the existence of a large body of research on inclusive education policies (Bourke, 2010; Johnstone & Chapman, 2009; Kelly, Devitt, O’Keffee, & Donovan, 2014; Peters, 2007), little knowledge exists on how such policies are incorporated into practices (Ahmmed & Mullick, 2014; Forlin, 2010a; Naicker, 2007; Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013) from a policy enactment and institutional perspective. This paper seeks to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of the adoption of inclusive education policies through the lens of policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) that examines the interpretation and translation of policy texts into context-relevant practices. As it will be evidenced in my critical review of the literature, the enactment construct has not been sufficiently used in policy research that particularly relate to inclusive education in Ontario. Instead, policy analysis and the practice of inclusive education have been widely examined through the implementation model. The implementation model is a perspective that portrays policy adoption as a hierarchical, top-down, and formal transfer of text into action without attention to the policy’s contextual dimensions, namely the social, organizational, and cultural dimensions that are highly significant in policy practice and research (Ball et al., 2012).

Globally speaking, the existence of challenges associated with the implementation of policies, particularly those related to the inclusion of students with special needs, is evident in the literature (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit, & van Deventer, 2016; Hamdan, Anuar, & Khan, 2016; Mosia, 2014; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014). After examining many policy implementation studies, Werts and Brewer (2015) found that the aims of education policies are not usually in line with what teachers believe, as well as the motivations and capacities they have. Addressing the significance of context, Heimans (2014) claims that contextual fac-

tors are rarely considered in education policy research. Giving priority to the element of *context* can help us to understand how “policies are taken up, variously inflected, translated and interpreted” (Heimans, 2014, p. 308). According to Singh, Heimans, and Glasswell (2014), context is an analytic construct that allows policy enactment researchers to realize how policies are translated and incorporated into actions and practices in schools. They contend that the notions of enactment and context together constitute a significant contribution that supports the literature of critical policy analysis, such as inclusive education policy research and practice.

Adding to the critique of formal implementation models, Werts and Brewer (2015) state that education policies do not anticipate any democratic engagement at the place where they are practiced, but they tend to marginalize “the perspectives and experiences of those living out the policy” (p. 224), the policy actors. This potential for marginalization highlights the need to reconsider the relation between the social, the cultural, and the organizational context and a given mandated institutional policy, and how such a relation informs policy outcomes. Therefore, in my view, the enactment construct is a more workable approach to be used in the analysis of the adoption of inclusive education policies and practice. For Vekeman, Devos, and Tuytens (2015), policy makers do not often recognize the multiple interpretations and concerns of those who are acting out or translating a policy into practices. They contend that what makes policy practice more difficult is the existence of multiple interpretations, even within the same organization. Thus, the translation of a given institutional policy such as *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) into practices may not fulfill the policy’s objectives that have been initially set. This policy calls upon school boards in Ontario and their personnel, particularly teachers, to “understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society” (OME, 2014, p. 6). However, transforming these ethical objectives into real-life practices become subject to the various social, cultural, organizational, and belief systems at schools. Therefore, it is best to offer some space for policy actors to interpret a mandated policy according to their situated context and within the policy’s institutional framework (Vekeman et al., 2015). According to Heimans (2014), the policy enactment perspective shifts the direction of policy analysis from understanding the conceptual meaning of policies to the examination of the contextual practices of local policy actors. Here, Ball (1994) reminds us that policies are never straightforward, rather “they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set” (p. 19). Thus, with the enactment perspective, policy goals, practices, and outcomes become negotiable, context-informed, and dependent on the meanings that policy actors make in their own situated context.

In addition to the concept of enactment, this paper draws from Neo-Institutionalism theory (NI) (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) as a macro level component that can enhance the analysis of the adoption of inclusive education policies. NI theory emphasizes how particular institutional rules, norms, and regulations have their share in shaping the ways policy actors view themselves in interpreting and translating inclusive education policies. Having said that, policy analysis researchers should not only consider the micro level framework within which policy actors perform their practices but also to attend to the macro level one, the institutional. This paper claims that the enactment model and NI together can offer a new tool to examine and analyze the adoption of complex inclusive education policies in Ontario. I argue that this could be accomplished by devoting particular attention to the interplay of the micro level (local context), and the macro level (policy making), and how this interplay informs the practices of local policy actors. With this argument, policy researchers are provided with a new and wider conceptual framework to utilize in understanding how inclusive education policies are and can be fused into the practices of policy actors in Ontario schools.

The Adoption of Inclusive Education Policies: Learning from International Cases

The adoption of inclusive education policies continues to be a challenging task across the world due to the underestimation of many factors including the context. For instance, Naicker (2007) noted that the implementation of inclusive education policies in South African schools remains problematic due to beliefs that have fostered exclusion for years. He claimed that in South Africa, inclusive education policy did not develop in line with the pedagogical revolution (inclusive teaching and learning in a digital age) and got “stuck at a political level since it ignored epistemological issues in the training of educationists” (Naicker, 2007, p. 2). Naicker’s study highlights the disparity between the inclusive policy agenda and the profes-

sional development and educational strategies at the school level. In Bangladesh, Ahmmed and Mullick (2014) found that the implementation of inclusive education (IE) initiatives faces multiple complexities in practice. They believe that “contextually relevant strategies to address these complications and implement IE reform policies successfully” (Ahmmed & Mullick, 2014, p. 168) are needed. The struggle with the implementation model is embedded in (1) resource allocation for inclusive education, (2) parental engagement in the school activities and decision-making, and (3) the need for advanced teacher development and school leaders’ empowerment (Ahmmed & Mullick, 2014). Consequently, translating policy into practice rests on a robust organization and serious collaborative work at the local level among all policy actors (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009). Collaboration practices for Kim (2013) serve as a significant factor that promotes teachers’ professional development in the inclusive classroom and in turn the achievement of policy goals such as successful learning experiences and assured well-being for all learners.

Sensemaking and Policy Adoption

Within the competitive Korean learning environment where academic achievement is of high concern among parents, Kim (2013) noted that it is very challenging to implement an inclusive education approach as students are under pressure due to their parents’ high expectations. To adopt inclusion policies, Kim believes that an “insufficient understanding and inactive participation from principals of the regular school act as one of the barriers to inclusion” (p. 81). According to Dudley-Marling and Burns (2013), the enactment of the US law PL 94-142 states that all children with special needs must learn together with their non-disabled peers in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and be provided with an appropriate education. However, the outcomes of these objectives rest on local teachers’ definitions of disability and inclusion (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2013). In this vein, Weick (1995) contends that the implementation of policy in organizations such as schools depends on the existing organizational processes and how local teachers make sense of policy. Kelly, Devitt, O’Keffee, and Donovan (2014) argue that Irish legislation and educational policies do facilitate inclusion by offering guidelines; however, the ways in which such policies are being incorporated into practices remains subject to the multiple interpretations of actors in schools. They found that students with special education needs (SEN) continue to move from mainstream schools to special schools due to the presence of an exclusion-oriented environment in the former. I argue that these studies contribute collectively to the significance of context which must be taken more seriously in policy practice and policy making research if to alleviate policy-associated challenges.

Policy Adoption and the Local Context

Referring to context, Kelly et al. (2014) contend that “the fundamental criteria necessary for implementing a change in an educational system were not explored sufficiently prior to implementation” (p. 79). The shift from segregation to inclusion requires an adjustment of school culture and attitudes even with the implementation model being fully supported (Kelly et al., 2014). That is, at the school level, the implementation of inclusive education has to overcome many obstacles including lack of teacher training, inadequate educational assessment of students with SEN, and incompatible curriculum and resources (Kelly et al., 2014). With the existence of many inclusive education policies and approaches, Sailor (2015) from the US, argues that there is a clear continuous emphasis on the complexity of differentiating instruction to accommodate all learners. Referring to the crucial role of context, he notes that “what better way to approach this complex problem than to attend to the entire ecology of the learning situation?” (Sailor, 2015, p. 95). Relatedly, Forlin (2010a) found that the contextual factors that obstruct a significant adoption of inclusive education at schools in Hong Kong include lack of teachers’ autonomy, lack of inclusion-oriented experiences, fixed curricula, and high working demands. To overcome the challenges of adopting an inclusive education policy model she adds, the external control on students’ achievement, such as the dilemma of testing requirements according to the Canadian context, should be minimized to allow classroom teachers to develop their inclusive skills and monitor their students’ academic progress (Forlin, 2010a).

The Role of the Macro Level System in Policy Adoption

In their study, Johnstone and Chapman (2009) argued that it is unacceptable to train only some teachers in particular schools on how to practice a new inclusive policy and assume that untrained teachers in other school contexts will conform to that practice. In this vein, Peters (2007) stresses the fact that inclusive

education policies get “shaped by people (actors) in the context of society, whether locally, nationally, or globally” (p. 100). For her, the practicality of the inclusive approach lies in changing the discourses about SEN students in related policy documents that tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive (Peters, 2007). Alternatively, Bourke (2010) argued that the inclusive education policy models in Queensland are being introduced in the school system without significant attention to how school contexts impact both teachers and students. She noted that although many initiatives towards inclusive education have been offered, school structures and strategies continue to reflect an exclusive practice and teachers continue to feel confused and frustrated about the term *inclusion* (Bourke, 2010). That is, the disparity between policy making and policy-in-practice persists. Young and Lewis (2015) looked at Finnish schools. They found that these schools are offered “considerable autonomy to organize special education according to local values, relying on a culture of trust” (Young & Lewis, 2015, p. 9). In other words, the Finnish education system seems to offer its local schools a chance to interpret and translate new policies according to their organizational context. By looking at the Finnish system, a critical reader could argue that transforming complex inclusive education policies into practices is not an up-to-bottom process but a context-informed one.

The Critique of the Implementation Model: Towards a Context-Informed Approach

Many studies have examined the theoretical and practical work of inclusive education and its related policies towards advancing the learning of *all* students in the inclusive classroom (Ainscow, 2007; Forlin, 2010b; Keefe, Rossi, de Valenzuela, & Howarth, 2000; Loreman, 2010; Mittler, 2000; Slee, 2010). However, a question to which the answer remains vague is how can we best understand the processes by which inclusive education policies are translated into practices at schools. The knowledge about translating policy into practice tends to be mostly framed by the implementation model. As noted above, this model is insufficient if we aim to offer a context-sensitive account of how inclusive policies are analyzed and incorporated into practices. Embedded in the context, the enactment model becomes a more promising approach in the analysis of inclusive education policies.

I claim that inclusive education is a contested concept and has become the subject of debates in academic and policymaking circles all over the world. Relatedly, a published report about inclusive education by the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (2008) identified the inclusion approach as a challenging route. According to the report, it takes a serious contribution from all of those concerned about inclusion to eliminate the barriers to students’ success. This is a promising recognition of the role played by both the macro and the micro level systems. In Ontario, Canada, Inclusive education policies aim to accommodate the learning of all students including those with special learning needs and provide them with the necessary tools and strategies to overcome their challenges and achieve their potential (OME, 2014). However, a context-free translation of these policies into practices is problematic. Johnstone and Chapman (2009) remind us that the ultimate aim of education policies is to ensure they are translated into practices at schools; however, the adoption phase remains complex while actors continue to face challenges in interpreting and assessing those policies’ objectives. This explicates the idea that policies are tools that “sanction, encourage, and disseminate desired practice” (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009, p. 131), a practice that is often institutionalized and conforms to pre-set norms and rules. Having said that, the struggles of policy implementation in educational organizations such as schools, returns to those involved in policy making who in many cases, tend to disregard the complexities of schools and their context and how these inform the policy actors’ practices. This contempt for context, in line with the implementation model can be exemplified in the following quote:

While teacher training is an essential component of launching a policy with implications for classroom practice, many policy-makers gamble that, once launched, those practices will be more widely adopted. Their hope is that demonstrating the effectiveness of an intervention on a small scale, but in a way that is highly visible to a wider audience, will create a local demand for wider implementation. (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009, p. 132)

The assumption that policies are generalizable and transferable to all contexts seems difficult, especially in light of the multiple meanings, representations, and discourses that circulate in educational organizations. In response to this decontextualized view of policy practices and adoption, Riveros and Viczko (2016) argue that the enactment perspective offers a “way to talk about the transformations and adaptations of

educational policy that overcomes the limitations of the instrumentalist models in policy analysis” (p. 67) such as those of policy implementation.

For the purpose of policy analysis, researchers have identified many shortcomings in the policy implementation construct (May, 2015). These inadequacies for May (2015) are due to the lack of acknowledgment of the “basic conflicts among the actors charged with carrying out policies” (p. 279). Over time, it is becoming more evident that policies calling for action at a governmental level, such as education reform, are experiencing challenges in practice at the local level. In May’s view, such challenges depend on the evolution of policies while they are in the translation phase, and the context-associated demands and conditions. These demands and conditions are embedded in the institutional and organizational frameworks that shape the means by which these policies are practiced, or more specifically, enacted. Thus, disregarding the policy context can lead to undesirable outcomes because context serves as the milieu within which policy meanings are constructed. The context here mirrors the place, norms, and the values of its inhabitants including the teachers, students, administrators, and other school personnel. Werts and Brewer (2015) claim that the limited positive impact of policy in schools “is due to continual attempts to understand local actors, not on their terms but, instead, in relationship to the reformer’s goals” (p. 207). Having said that, inclusive education policies and their translation into practice will remain unclear if a top-down managerial approach towards policy analysis and practice continues to exist. This persistence promotes us to reconsider the way we look at these policies. This is to say that with respect to pre-set institutional guidelines on policy practice, we need to analyze the adoption of policies from local perspectives and to be continuously aware of how context speaks to the policy’s various outcomes.

Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005) noted that a consensus exists about *adoption* being “a decidedly complex endeavor, more complex than the policies, programs, procedures, techniques, or technologies that are the subject of the implementation efforts” (p. 2). Regarding the practical problems associated with the incorporation of inclusive education policies into practices, Florian (1998) noted that while inclusion is one of a human’s rights and the focal point of inclusive education policies, concerns remain about the inclusive schools’ learning and teaching practices. Consequently, by overlooking the contextual elements of policies, we continue to bring about less valuable outcomes. Although the inclusion concept is highly recognized today in Global North countries such as Canada and the US (see Forlin, 2010b), inclusive policies, and how they inform the practices of teachers, administrators, and school principals are still unclear. Relatedly, Thompson, Lyons, and Timmons (2015) realized the ambiguity in conceptualizing the adoption of inclusive education policy. They found that while the inclusion approach is evident at the public policy level, a gap between policy and practice still exists. Similarly, in the Swedish context, Ineland (2015) asserts that Swedish classrooms are promised with the inclusive learning environment, yet the practice of inclusion reveals, “fragmented organizational structures [and] professional attitudes together with vague guiding principles for inter-professional collaboration” (p. 54).

Policy Enactment and Policy Actors

Attention to the institutional positions and experiences of the policy actors is a promising task that clarifies how policies are put into practice (Maguire, Braun, & Ball, 2015; Werts & Brewer, 2015). According to Sin (2014a), policy can be molded and re-molded. That is, when policy is enacted, it becomes subject to multiple understandings depending on its situated context. The enactment of policy has been viewed as *assemblage* (Riveros & Viczko, 2016) in which “people, their material objects, and their discursive practices are brought together to enact policy in productive ways” (Koyama, 2015, p. 548). Assemblage, according to Koyama (2015) represents a collection of various practices, plans, processes, materials, and the imagination of new forms of policies. Further, Mulcahy (2015) argues that policy enactment is not only about written texts but also about how policies are perceived and put into practice. Similarly, enactment has been conceptualized as “a meshwork of policy practices. These practices draw on divergent material and discursive resources for their ongoing emergent (re)constitution” (Heimans, 2012, p. 317).

Viczko and Riveros (2015) contend that the analysis of policy processes should not view schools as organizations that lack context, or a place where policies are translated similarly by all actors. In their view, to understand the realities of policy actors and to conceptualize alternative ways of policy translation, it is imperative to examine “what comes to be performed through policy” (p. 480). According to Sin (2014b), two factors are considered when we look at policy research outcomes in higher education. These factors are the policy process itself including the making of it and its translation into practice, as

well as the policy actors. Every policy actor plays a role or performs a set of activities that add to the understanding of how policy is enacted. Ball (2015) reminds us that “policies are ‘contested’, mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts” (p. 311). These *policy actors* and *contexts* are important factors in negotiating, constructing, and enacting policy (Sin, 2014b). That is, the beliefs of policy actors regarding a policy are subject to contextual circumstances that impact how policies are translated (Sin, 2014b).

Maguire et al. (2015) inform us that further attention has been devoted in recent years to multiple policy reforms, particularly assessment, curriculum, and teacher education with the aim to advance students’ academic achievement. Therefore, in future policy research, it becomes “useful to consider what some of the more senior school managers have to say about policy work. What comes across is their understanding of the wider context as well as their decision-making capacity – their capacity to interpret and define” (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 496). It is worth noting here that few studies have examined how policies such as those related to inclusion get enacted through the actions of policy actors in schools and other institutions (Maguire et al., 2015). Consequently, understanding these actors’ positions helps policy researchers and policy decision makers to conceptualize how policies need to be constructed and disseminated. Ball (2015) maintains that when we study policy text, we should focus on how language is being used in documents and practices. However, policy as a discourse attends to a discursive and meaningful understanding of the different practices to make sense of how education is constituted (Ball, 2015).

Policy enactment then offers a venue to re-conceptualize policy adoption as it recognizes texts and documents as complex structures to decode (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). Policy enactment research attends to the relation between the policy process and its context. In this regard, Braun et al. (2011) assert that translating a policy such as Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy into practice requires attention to the relation between the objective conditions and “a set of subjective ‘interpretational’ dynamics and thus acknowledge that the material, structural and relational are part of policy analysis in order to make better sense of policy at the institutional level” (p. 588). Regarding the material context, Braun et al. (2011) stated that in schools, the staff, available technology, the space, and the layout of buildings play key roles in policy enactment. In other words, enacting an inclusive education-related policy for instance in a particular school depends on the organizational structure and perhaps the financial and professional capacities of that school. Thus, it becomes illogical to assume that all schools will practice policies similarly. Therefore, the need to consider the context in policy analysis research is relevant because “policy making and policy makers tend to assume ‘best possible’ environments for ‘implementation’: ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources” (Braun et al., 2011, p. 595). This assumption allows us as policy researchers to understand that what policy actors do, may not necessarily reflect the intended policy outcomes since the actors’ practices depend on their understanding of that policy (Maguire et al., 2015).

Completing the Picture with a Neo-Institutional Perspective to Analyze Policy Practices

A complex definition for *institution* has been given by March and Olsen (2006). For them, it is a combination of “rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances” (March & Olsen, 2006, p. 3). Simply put by Schmidt (2010), institutions are “socially constituted and culturally framed rules and norms” (p. 2). For Scott (2014), institutions are a set of “rules, norms and beliefs to which individuals and organizations conform” (p. xi). However, advocates of new institutionalism have not agreed upon a standard definition for *institutions* as they do not share a similar methodological and research agenda (Immergut, 1998). New institutionalists according to Immergut (1998), reject behavior as the sole idea behind NI as it is not enough to explain complex social-political phenomena, such as institutions. In NI, attention is devoted to the institutional rules as well as the routines and the procedures followed by actors within organizations in response to given policies. Figure 1 describes how the enactment perspective with Neo-Institutionalism contributes to a contextual understanding of policy practices that fulfill institutional objectives such as students’ academic achievement.

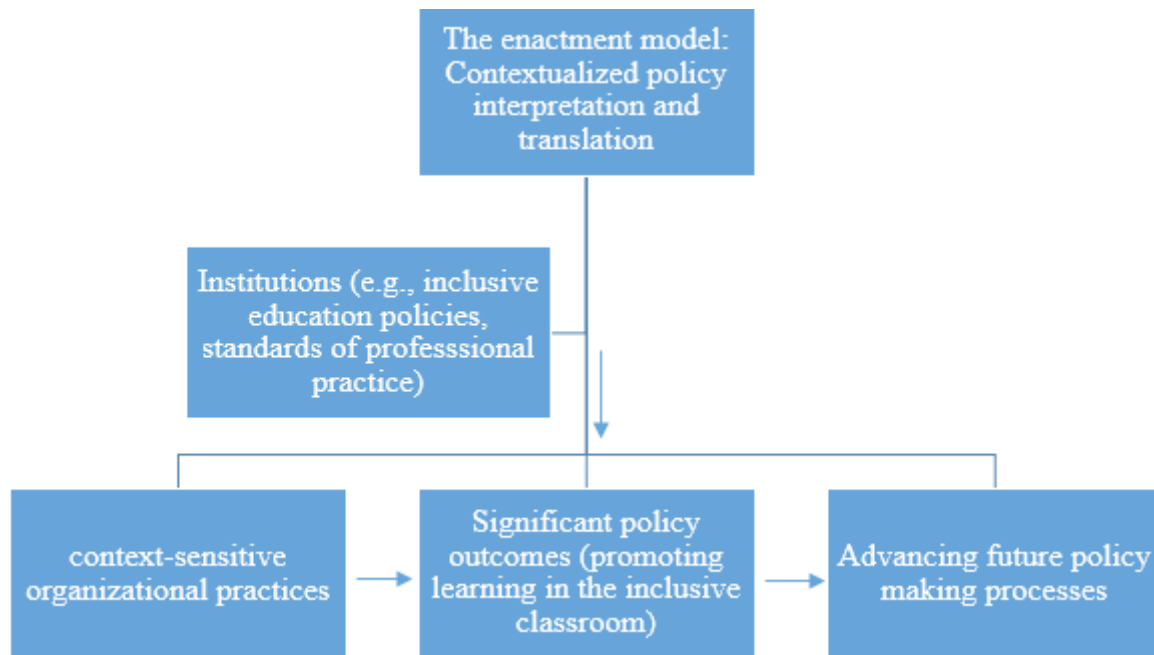


Figure 1. The relevance of context in policy analysis and policy practices in schools.

These ideas have led Immergut (1998) to suggest that new policy decisions (e.g., inclusive education policies) change the social structure of the organizations.

It is argued that institutions through their rules and norms tend to shape the perceptions of policy actors (Ineland, 2015). In turn, these perceptions may inform the practices and strategies followed by those individuals while enacting policies of inclusive education in a public organization such as a school. Having said that, I propose that using both the idea of enactment (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) and the theory of Neo-Institutionalism (NI) (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995) constitute a new analytical framework to understand how inclusive education policies are translated into practices in Ontario schools. I argue that through the notion of enactment, we can analyze policies and policy practices by attending to their situated context whereas NI offers us a chance to step back and realize how certain institutional macro level rules, norms, and guidelines tend to guide and frame those practices. Further, I would say that addressing policy making processes in future policy analysis research from an NI perspective will invite public institutions such as Ministry of Education, school boards, and the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) to re-conceptualize their mandated policies. A re-conceptualization that realizes the impact of context on the educational organizations' policy practices in ways that allow for a better learning experience for all learners in Ontario schools.

Revisiting the Concept of Organizations

According to Ineland (2015), studies of organizational analysis show us how organizations, such as public schools, seek to adapt required institutional changes to gain continuous support and legitimacy. These institutional changes can be represented here as the new policies issued by Ontario's Ministry of Education that relate to educating all students in the same classroom. For Ineland (2015), organizations are "not as rational and consistent but largely as open systems that are sensitive to expectations in the institutional environment" (p. 56). Inside these organizations, attitudes including beliefs and values are subject to the institutional rules (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) that shape how practices such as those that relate to inclusion, are managed and organized. For Radaelli, Dente, and Dossi (2012), institutions play a fundamental role in the policy process and policy actors are required to examine the extent to which institutional frameworks impact their practices. Further, they believe that merging both policy analysis and the institutional analysis is a promising step towards strengthening NI as a perspective that would provide a situated understanding of the role of different actors in policy action.

Scott and Meyer (1991) found that policy research does not only focus on decision making but on policy practices as well. For them, “in one policy arena after another, examination revealed that far from being automatic, the implementation of public policy decisions is highly problematic” (Scott & Meyer, 1991, p. 113). Thus, responding to new policies requires attention to how organizations are structured and how they link policy makers with the enactors (Scott & Meyer, 1991). Over the years, the old institutionalism’s focus on behaviors and fixed structures got shifted to an emphasis on policy actors’ practices and their impact on institutions, creating what is called today New-Institutionalism (Lecours, 2005). This emphasis on practices according to Schatzki, Cetina, and Savigny (2001), showcases that individuals’ interactions with the surrounding structures and systems can illuminate how social groups are constituted. For these authors, the focus on practice portrays language as “a type of activity (discursive) and hence a practice phenomenon, whereas institutions and structures are effects” of that practice (Schatzki, Cetina, & Savigny, 2001, p. 12). A significant argument of NI is that institutions influence the actions and “shape the perceptions of actors, and through this mechanism, leads to behavior that favors the reproduction of institutions” (Lecours, 2005, p. 17). That is, institutions maintain the prevailing dominant norms and beliefs in society and constrict the actors’ agency and the possibilities for organizational change. Such a claim can be examined by attending to the ways actors in schools interpret and translate institutional policies, such as those of inclusive education, into practices that support all students in the inclusive classroom.

It is worth noting that NI rejects two perspectives on the relation between institutions and the practices performed by policy actors. The first perspective is that institutions are restrictions-free instruments manipulated and adjusted by the actors to serve their interests. NI responds to this perspective by noting that actors operate within frameworks shaped by their interests, so their capacity for practice and change are central to understanding the organization (Lecours, 2005). The second perspective considers institutions as neutral, fixed, and unchangeable, stressing that institutions do not conform to a contextual change (Lecours, 2005). This perspective is rejected in NI by further acknowledging the meaning making capacities and the contextualized practices of actors, which are discounted in the old institutionalism. With these two responses, NI continues to offer policy analysis a wider framework to study how policy actors interpret and translate policies according to their context, a framework that suggests the existence of an environment that entails constraints and affords possibilities for action.

The Institutionalization of Policy Practices

NI proposes that the structure of formal organizations, such as schools, is constructed upon “institutional forces, including rational myths, knowledge legitimated through the educational system and by the professions, public opinion, and the law” (Powell, 2007, p. 1). The conceptualization of organizations as structures influenced by political and social environments suggests that organizational practices correspond, in a substantive way, to these structures (Powell, 2007). Thus, organizational practices can reflect how policy actors in Ontario schools interpret, for instance, inclusive education policies. From a sociological perspective, Sehring (2009) noted that NI “seeks to understand how institutions influence orientations (preferences, perceptions), anticipations, interests, and objectives of actors and therefore the ways solutions to problems are sought” (p. 32). For example, institutional rules set by Ontario’s Ministry of Education and the Ontario College of Teachers in relation to inclusive education influence the ways policy actors adopt inclusion policies and incorporate them into their practices. As a practical example, funding discrepancies among schools in Ontario (George, Gopal, & Woods, 2014) influence school teachers’ capacities in accommodating their students’ diverse learning needs. In the same vein, Powell and Colyvas (2008) contend that the aims and interests of the policy actors are institutionalized, meaning that institutions can frame and limit their actions.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991) claim that both the cognitive and the normative features of institutions inform the actions of policy actors. Indeed, institutions “regulate humans’ conduct, but indirectly via the membership of individual agents in a common institutionalized realm of discourse” (Bidwell, 2006, p. 35). Such regulation requires the agents, for instance the policy actors who are enacting an inclusive education policy, to align their interests with established societal norms and values. Nevertheless, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) remind us that institutions “establish the very criteria just by which people discover their preferences” (p. 11). Thus, it could be argued that inclusive education policy practices performed by school actors are influenced by the institutional context that relates not only to that policy but to the actors’ beliefs, values, and particular historical circumstances. Related to this idea, March and Olsen (2006) argue

that the actions of policy actors are framed by rules and beliefs that have been deemed socially acceptable in the wider society. However, the enactment of these rules remains subject to the available material, professional resources, and the capabilities of the policy actors (March & Olsen, 2006) that may relate, according to this study, to inclusive education.

For Scott (2014), *institutionalized practices* means practices that are infused “with values beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (p. 24). Whether these practices are institutionalized or not depends on “the position and role occupied by the actor” (Zucher, 1991, p. 86) as well as the context within which these practices are carried out. Organizations become institutionalized as they embody a set of values such as clear objectives and goals, and seek to preserve these values. The embodiment of these values explains *institutionalization* as a mechanism that continues to regulate the organizational practices until they become the norm among the multiple actors (Palmer, Biggart, & Dick, 2008). Powell and Colyvas (2008) note that in institutional research, a micro-level analysis would involve “theories that attend to enacting, interpretation, translation and meaning” (p. 276) of rules and norms by the individual actors. For them, this approach does not only examine the organizational structure but interrogates as well how actors understand their context and view themselves in the social environment. Since institutions tend to mandate the values, identities, and the interests of organizations such as schools (Lawrence, 2008), it becomes necessary from the NI lens, to understand how actors in these organizations enact certain policies such as those of inclusive education.

Conclusion

The analysis of the adoption of inclusive education policies in Ontario schools must be viewed as a complex and context-sensitive process. Many studies have concluded that a de-contextualized analysis of policy practice has contributed to a limited understanding of policy implementation (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009; Naicker, 2007; Vekeman, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015; Werts & Brewer, 2015). In this essay, I stressed the necessity to recognize that policy practices in Ontario schools is framed by contextual and institutional settings, and I defend that this perspective is vital in policy analysis, research, and practice. This paper has advanced a conceptual framework through which the analysis of inclusive education policies, particularly in Ontario, could be undertaken. My argument shows that using both the enactment perspective and NI theory would offer a significant theoretical framework to analyze inclusive education policies and their translation into practices. The rationale for using this framework resides on the much-needed emphasis on context and the recognition of the role of institutions in shaping organizational practices. It is worth noting that the suggested framework recognizes the policy actors’ orientations, beliefs, and values as powerful elements in how policies are practiced. Nonetheless, attending to the constraints that institutions may impose upon policy actors may help with the overall understanding of how inclusive education policies are interpreted and translated.

As these limitations are viewed as a contextual element in policy practice, the use of the notion of enactment to analyze inclusive policy adoption becomes significant. The enactment perspective emphasizes the role of context in shaping, altering, and informing the ways policy actors see themselves in translating policies such as those of inclusive education into practices. The translation of inclusive education policies in a diverse province such as Ontario is a complicated endeavor that requires a critical look regarding where, and under what conditions, these policies are practiced. This paper aimed to advance the literature of policy studies by offering a new approach to inclusive education policy analysis. It showed how attention to the local context (e.g., schools), as well as to the policy processes at the macro level (e.g., Ministry of Education, school boards, OCT), including the making of policies, could reorient the analysis of the translation of inclusive education policies into practices. Looking at the larger picture that shows how policy text, policy in practice, and the context are intermingled is an approach that can help us to better analyze policy adoption in schools.

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