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Policy Implementation and Cognition : Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research

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Abstract :

The purpose of this article is to develop an analytical framework for the implementation of education policies based on a cognitive perspective and show that the evolution of a reform in an implementation process is the result of a sense-making process. Changes in behaviour are seen as basically cognitive and as part of an external representation and perception process. This article tries to show that the cognitive perspective of implementing agents can help understand the implementation process of education reforms.

Interaction among Three Elements

Social players responsible of implementing policies construct their perception of education policies based on cognitive structures, situated cognition, and the role of external representations. The first element refers to an individual's knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. The second pertains to situations that influence an implementing agent's perceptions, and the third, to the role of external representations in an individual's sense-making regarding a policy.

Cognitive Analysis Framework of Implementation

The authors begin by summarizing the main theories explaining school policy implementation (i.e. role of the state, autonomy of local agents, social issues and so on). They then apply the three abovementioned elements to actual implementation situations.

The cognitive perspective that the authors develop shows that implementing agents must integrate, contextualize, interpret and construct the meaning of the messages conveyed by a policy. To understand the implementation process and the reasons for its success or failure, one must focus on how implementing agents interpret policy messages as well as on how they behave.

The authors focus a great deal on the perceptions (sense-making) of implementing agents because policies are implemented based on their understanding of what has to be done. Therefore, the same message may be interpreted in different ways and trigger a variety of emotions or challenge the values of implementing agents. In other words, the perceptions (sense-making) of implementing agents can change the way policies are implemented.

To conclude, it is acknowledged that a cognitive perspective leads to a better understanding of the policy implementation process because it helps to understand how the ideas of implementing agents are constructed. In addition, such a perspective helps to demystify the way in which the cognitive perceptions of individuals can contribute to the evolution of policies and to the implementation process.

Links :

This journal is also available in electronic format.

Key Words :

Education Policies, Cognitive Approach, Behaviourism, Implementation, External Representations, School Reform, Educational Practices, Intergovernmental Relations, Sense-making

