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POLICY

Why read this text..

The notion of policy is understood in anthropology as a sociocultural and historical phenomenon that has been approached as an instrument of government and exercise of power. The concept refers to forms of governance performed by institutions, agencies and policy-makers and involves intervening actions and practices of implementation, which, govern and mobilize collectivities and/or subjectivities. The concept of policy involves forms of control and regulation of social life (e.g. employment, citizenship rights, education, etc.), and ideological mechanisms of persuasion, coercion and violence (Wedel et al. 2005).

The anthropological study of education policy describes the ways education policy operates as a social, cultural, and ideological process. It examines the ways in which policy processes reflect and contest regimes of knowledge and power, create forms and practices of schooling and categorize people, ideas, and resources through the use of ideologies. It illustrates the implications these understandings have for policy debates and settings and the functioning of the educational system (Castagno & McCarty 2017).

Historical Context

The study of policy has been a recently emerging branch in anthropology (Wright 2006). Shore & Wright (1997) viewed policy as a significant organizing concept in society. They showcased that broad sections of social life, especially in Western societies and, increasingly, across the whole world are organized under the notion of policy (ibid:6). They stressed that policies are tools of power that provide ways for analyzing larger-scale processes of social and historical change. In their view, the study of policy should include all the institutions from the international to the local, the people, the procedures and the relevant texts that regulate aspects of societal life. Thus, they focused on government-led processes of reform, viewpoints of both governors and the governed and the subjects of policymaking. Studying policies as social and cultural constructions is a way to gain insights into processes of political transformation.

Shore (2012: 92-93) has elaborated further on the subtleties of the concept of policy as studied in anthropology. Anthropological accounts illustrate how policies are perceived in different contexts and the ways people experience, interpret and engage with policy processes. Although the notion is linked with rational forces imposed from above by some authoritative entity, yet, ethnographic evidence highlights the ambiguity, contestation, negotiation and fluidity inherent in these processes (ibid: 92).

The understanding of policy design and implementation involves an exploration of the contexts in which policies are embedded, how and why certain policies 'succeed' or 'fail' and how policy results are interpreted by people whose lives they effect. Policies comprise symbolism whose meaning is culturally-specific and context-defined.



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Overall, when studying policy, anthropology is interested in seeking answers to questions such as what does policy mean in particular contexts; what work does it perform and what are its effects; how does any policy relate to other institutions and practices within a particular society; what are the conditions that make this policy possible (ibid: 92-93).

a) Discussion

Education policy can be understood as the actions taken by governments with reference to educational systems and practices. Within this context, public and private institutions and agents collaborate with state organizations in order to design and implement educational policies (Viennet & Pont 2017). These policies cover a wide range of issues such as curricula, quality of learning, equity, multiculturalist interventions in school environments, evaluation mechanisms, etc. They are directed to and implemented by all actors involved in the educational processes.

Educational policies are shaped by political, economic, ideological and cultural forces. As a result, as Apple (2003) claims, the educational system becomes an arena where struggles occur over definitions of authority and culture between those who benefit from these policies. Grasping these processes provides the basis for the study of educational policy and a better understanding of the occurrences in schools and other educational contexts.

Hamman & Rosen (2011) define educational policy as a form of sociocultural practice that involves efforts by a range of actors with varying degrees of formal role authority to: a) define what is problematic in education, b) shape interpretations and means of how problems should be resolved, and c) determine to what vision of the future change efforts should be directed.

This conception of educational policy directs attention to the social and cultural processes of interpretation, contestation, adaptation, compromise, and sometimes resistance that shape all points on what would be conventionally understood as the continuum between policy and practice. It also points to the diversity and inter-connectedness of actors involved in the educational processes.

An anthropological focus on educational policy implementation illuminates the socially constructed nature of each of the above interrelated dimensions of policy (problem definition, strategies of problem resolution, and larger moral worldview). This perspective asserts that not only policy solutions but also the purported “problems” to which policies are addressed are the product of social and cultural processes (ibid: 466).

b) Practical Example

Lundin & Torpsten (2018) explore the relationship between state policies against discriminatory behavior and degrading treatment in Sweden and the ways schools document in their equity plans how they prevent offences and harassment. According to the so-called Education Act, all schools in Sweden must carry out a targeted work to protect their students’ rights and opportunities. All the measures schools introduce must be described in school-level policy documents, the so-called *equity plans*. Schools must address how they intervene against humiliating actions in seven areas: gender, transgender



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identity or expression, ethnic origin, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age.

The study examines the documents of schools in two municipalities in the South, two in the middle and two in the North of the country. The sample includes urban schools, medium-sized municipal schools and rural schools and 110 equity plans. The purpose is to understand the world-views expressed in the school documents in terms of discourses and subject positions. Each selected text is formulated by school staff members. In some schools, the analysis is based on a questionnaire given to students or/and parents. The research questions of the study include the perceived causes of discrimination and degrading treatment within the schools, the solutions that emerge in the equity plans and the subject positions that are constructed and made possible.

The authors identify three discourses in the material they examine: the 'perfect' school discourse, the 'designated' discourse and the educational discourse. These discourses are different in how they relate to discrimination and degrading treatment in the different opportunities they provide for students. According to the collected empirical material, there are no problems in the perfect school discourse. Everybody feels safe and there is no need for solutions. Here, the only subject position is the 'perfect' student. In the designated discourse, non-complying students cause problems and the solution is to educate them. In this discourse, there are two subject positions, the non-complier and the functioning student. In the educational discourse, problems are the dominant norms that lead to inequalities.

The three discourses constitute the basis for different understandings of the school context and the policies that are considered appropriate for giving solutions in preventing humiliating actions and protecting the students. The perfect school with its denial of problems stands out, as solutions to a non-existing problem are not needed. The designated discourse, points out problematic students as a cause of recurring issues. In the equity plans that use the designated discourse, there are no signs that the schools would consider the designated student as oppressed. Rather it is the ignorant students who need to be educated. The third discourse, the educational discourse, implies questioning norms and pursuing a critical approach to changing discriminatory patterns.

Thinking further:

- How are state education policies implemented at school?
- How do educational policies and their implementation affect students and teachers?
- Can teachers and school management intervene in the implementation of state policies?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Power, governance, subjectivity, ideology.



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