

Art. #2376, 8 pages, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v44n2a2376>

Primary school principals' experiences of the implementation of educational policy change

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In the study reported on here we explored the experiences of primary school principals in the implementation of educational policy change from an educational policy implementation (hereafter, EPI) theory perspective. With the study we aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges, facilitators, and complexities encountered by school principals when navigating the implementation of educational policy change within their respective schools. Data were gathered using a qualitative research approach through in-depth interviews with purposively sampled primary school principals selected based on their direct involvement in the implementation of educational policy changes after which the data were thematically analysed. The findings of this study shed light on the multi-faceted nature of policy implementation within primary schools highlighting the pivotal role of school principals as key actors in the process. Additionally, we discovered a range of challenges faced by school principals including their missing voice in the development of educational policies, resource constraints, conflicting stakeholder interests, a lack of support and training, and resistance to change. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable insights into ways in which policy implementation unfolds within the unique context of primary schools. It further suggests a practical policy implementation model for policymakers, educational leaders, and practitioners, offering guidance on how to navigate the complexities of implementing educational policy changes effectively. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational policy implementation and advances our understanding of the experiences of primary school principals as they navigate the dynamic landscape of policy change within their educational setting.

Keywords: education policy; education policy change; education policy implementation; free primary education (FPE); policy implementation theory

Introduction

Today, more than ever before, school principals have major problems in implementing education policies, particularly in their leadership roles (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). One of the most significant issues is interpreting and translating national and regional rules into school policy. While a number of studies were conducted in sub-Saharan African countries with regard to implementation of the policy of free primary education (hereafter, FPE) (Inoue & Oketch, 2008; Mamba, 2019; Moshoeshoe, Ardington & Piraino, 2019; Mukurunge, Tlali & Bhila, 2019; Mulinya & Orodho, 2015; Mwanza & Silukuni, 2020; Nudzor, 2013; Somasse, 2014), very few (if any) directed their focus to how the implementers of these policies understood, interpreted and actually put them into practice in primary schools.

To address this knowledge gap, we explored the experiences of primary school principals in the implementation of educational policy within the context of the FPE policy in Eswatini. We explored the thoughts and feelings that could possibly influence principals' actions towards implementation of educational policy changes. The research question in this study was: "What are the experiences of principals in the implementation of educational policy changes in Eswatini primary schools?"

While the majority of studies explored this phenomenon from a quantitative perspective (Moshoeshoe et al., 2019; Mulinya & Orodho, 2015; Mwanza & Silukuni, 2020; Somasse, 2014), we found it appropriate to investigate the phenomenon from qualitative methodological underpinnings. The aim was to unveil how these key stakeholders' engagement with issues of policy change might improve the implementation of educational policy changes in primary schools in Eswatini. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 12 school principals were used to share their experiences and reflect on possible avenues for improving the implementation of educational policy changes. We found it important to share the findings of this study to contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic of policy implementation. Before we do that, we would like to unpack what education policy entails by using the FPE policy as our point of departure.

Statement of the Problem

At the time of publication of this article, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Eswatini was initiating and implementing large-scale reform policy. It is important to note that policies, as operational instruments in the country, are top-down, and school principals, who are in charge of schools' overall management, are not involved in policy creation. However, their involvement can significantly contribute to the effective implementation and survival of policies. Furthermore, the policies are transplanted from elsewhere (Hallsworth, Parker & Rutter, 2011) and affected by a diverse international society, raising questions about their context responsiveness (Elenkov & Manev, 2005). Donohue and Bornman (2014) express concern that

transplanted policies face issues of survival in local settings. The FPE policy is an excellent example of a policy that is failing in the Eswatini context.

Importantly, some of the policies are enacted for their political symbolism rather than their practicality. When such policies are implemented, the funding and capacity to deliver them are often assumed (Hallsworth et al., 2011). Such assumptions make the implementation and survival of policies in the Eswatini context very problematic because of prevailing circumstances such as insufficient funds and the impracticality of the context. Thus, the difficulties will be experienced by principals who are responsible for the implementation thereof. Bhengu and Myende (2016) acknowledge that principals are expected to provide leadership and management in an ever-changing policy context, without distinct ways to ever achieve this. Some of these policies are lacking in their mandate, yet a clear policy mandate tends to be the most effective means by which to realise policy implementation and continued existence. Consequently, school principals struggle as they seek to find effective means of dealing with issues of implementing new policies. Within the Eswatini context, little research has been done on the experiences of school principals in this area. As a result, the gap in the literature is that minimal research data on school principals' experiences of implementing educational policy changes exist. Until recently, research (Dlamini, 2017; Sifuna 2014) was concentrated on curriculum reform, with a special emphasis on the principal's position as curriculum leader and manager in a changing educational system. While policies in Eswatini have changed, little attention was given to how school principals experience their work in the context of policy change.

Free Primary Education (FPE) Concisely

More than 30 years ago, the World Declaration on Education for All urged world countries to intensify their efforts to meet the basic learning needs of all. Delegates from 155 countries, Eswatini (Swaziland then) included, agreed to make primary education accessible to all children and to massively reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade (Dlamini, 2017). Through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), these countries vowed to achieve "Universal Primary Education (UPE)" by 2015. Goal 2 of the MDGs wished "to ensure that, by 2015, children, boys and girls alike, would have completed a full course of primary schooling." Consequently, more and more countries were making primary education free.

Both the UPE framework and the MDGs were expected to be achieved by 2015. However, when the MDG agenda ended in 2015, not all of the targets had been met, and they were replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as targets.

As an extension of the MDGs, the SDGs aimed to accomplish the tasks that the MDGs did not. This is clearly articulated in the preamble of the 2015 SDGs, which specifies that the SDGs "seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve" (United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2008:1). These SDGs are targeted to be achieved in 2030. This broad vision of education and the holistic approach to sector development were subsequently translated into Goal 4 of the SDGs, which states that every United Nations (UN) member state must "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." For the purpose of this article, the concept of FPE is maintained as our point of departure.

It is important to discuss briefly what the concept "FPE" entails since it is our belief that every UN member state needs to understand it before attempting to implement it. Kretzer (2020) views free education as the abolishment of school fees. He goes further and unpacks the concept of fees as embodied in his definition. The misinterpretation of this element has resulted in much controversy surrounding the implementation of the FPE policy. According to Kretzer (2020) there are two types of fees. Firstly, direct fees or costs such as tuition fees or textbook fees and so on, which means they are spent directly on education. Secondly, indirect fees or costs, which are not directly used for educational purposes, but are a necessity, such as travel expenses to school. However, Kretzer (2020) warns that there is no consensus about a definition of free education or FPE, as the terminology is generally used interchangeably (Inoue & Oketch, 2008). Free education is mainly seen as FPE and includes the abolishment of tuition or textbook fees (UNESCO, 2002). Hence, in the study reported on here we investigated principals' experiences as they were implementing this policy.

To reaffirm their commitment to achieving the set goal, UN member states such as Zambia announced the implementation of the FPE policy in 2002 (Mwanza & Silukuni, 2020), Lesotho in 2009 (Mukurunge et al., 2019), Benin in 2006 (Somasse, 2014), Kenya in 2003 (Mulinya & Orodho, 2015), Namibia in 2013 (Ipinge & Likando, 2013), and Eswatini in 2009 (MOET, 2009). The gaps between the implementation dates by member states clearly indicate the complexity of the task with which they were faced. The complex nature of the task is also evidenced by the fact that most member states were unable to meet the target date; hence, there was a need for its extension to 2030. In this article we concentrate and report on the experiences of Eswatini primary school principals regarding the implementation of the FPE policy in their schools.

Implementation of the Policy Change in Accordance with Viennet and Pont's (2017) Theory

The government of Eswatini entered into a process of aligning its national policies with the MDGs of the United Nations. Among these were the National Development Strategy (NDS) of 1999, the Poverty Reduction Strategic Action Plan (MOET, 2009), the Education and Training Sector Policy or EDSEC policy (Ministry of Education and Training, 2011), and many others. The Eswatini Constitution of 2005, which was ratified by the monarch in February 2006, also came into effect in February 2009, after which the FPE Act was enacted as a legal framework for FPE in 2010. Prompted by civil litigation, the government was compelled to implement FPE in 2010, regardless of the economic challenges the Kingdom was facing at the time. The policy needed to be decentralised – i.e. to be taken to schools for implementation – and all eyes were on the school principal as the head of the school. Hope (2014) regards principals as the initiators, innovators, motivators, advocates, and communicators of the intended policy reform and the multiple roles that they play were essential for the successful implementation of the FPE policy.

Schools in these member states had admission policies in place (referred to as “old” policies) that needed to be revised in order to comply with new requirements. According to Viennet and Pont (2017), the implementation of new policies requires revision and adaptation of new and sometimes complex governance systems. School principals should, therefore, understand the implementation process and clarify its determinants, as this enables them to formulate plans of action and guiding principles throughout the stakeholder groupings and communities in which their schools are located (Hope, 2014). As stated earlier, Viennet and Pont's (2017) theory guided our research. This framework offers four key dimensions of educational policy implementation, namely a coherent implementation strategy to reach schools, smart policy design, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and a conducive institutional policy and societal context.

This implies that the Eswatini Ministry of Education, in collaboration with relevant parties (including school principals), must develop a clear strategy and guidelines on how the policy is to be implemented in schools. Viennet and Pont (2017) further state that the strategy outlines concrete measures that bring all the determinants together in a logical manner to make the policy operational at school level. It is in this context that we found this theory more appropriate as a lens through which to understand school principals' experiences of the implementation of educational policy changes. Having outlined how the chosen theory informs this article, we now present the principles and methods that we engaged to generate data for this study.

Methodological Underpinnings

Research Approach and Design

We situated this study in the interpretative paradigm with an assumption that social reality is not singular or objective, but shaped by human experience and social contacts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Maree, 2020; Walther, 2016). We further deemed this paradigm fit for the study because each principal has unique experiences of the implementation of educational policy changes and we wanted to understand the phenomenon under investigation from their point of view (Creswell, 2018; Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011; Maree, 2020). Hence, a significant amount of time was spent interacting with principals in their natural contexts to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences regarding educational policy change (Creswell, 2018).

Sampling Criteria

We purposively and conveniently sampled participants in this study with the aim of selecting information-rich individuals that would help us understand something about those cases (not to generalise the findings to other situations) (Creswell, 2018; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Although 158 school principals were available in the selected region, only 12 principals who happened to have experienced the FPE policy change from its inception to its implementation were part of the study, which is sufficient for a qualitative study.

Participants

All principals who had been in active school leadership for a period of more than 5 years were considered for participation in this study, and 12 principals qualified. To guarantee the confidentiality of the schools and principals participating in this study, we anonymised their identities by using codes to replace their real names. For example, they were named School A (SA), School B (SB), Principal 1 (P1), Principal 2 (P2), and Principal 3 (P3), respectively.

Data Collection

In line with our adoption of a qualitative approach and the case study design, we gathered data using semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data collection. We were, therefore, able to combine our pre-determined set of open-ended questions as we explored certain themes or responses in greater depth (Henning et al., 2004; Sobh & Perry, 2006). Not only participants were able to express their views, experiences, and opinions candidly, but we could also probe and prompt (Henning et al., 2004). Moreover, because of their flexibility, interviews allowed for an intimate involvement with participants which

enabled us to get to the core of the study (Creswell, 2018), namely to gather the experiences of principals on the implementation of educational policy change.

Data Analysis

We qualitatively analysed data through content analysis, specifically, conceptual analysis (Maree, 2020). The adoption of conceptual analysis enabled us to identify conflicting opinions and existing issues regarding the implementation of educational policy changes. In analysing the data, we followed the phases suggested by Henning et al. (2004). In the first phase – an orientation to the data – we read and studied the data to familiarise ourselves with the whole dataset and to grasp the context. After gaining an intensive understanding of the data, we moved to the second phase, which entailed the coding of segments of meaning. In this phase we categorised all related codes into groups and sought relationships within categories to form thematic patterns. Finally, the third phase comprised formulating and writing down the final themes that emerged from the datasets and we presented them as patterns of related themes.

Ethical Considerations

As researchers, we ensured that we followed all applicable research ethics (De Vos et al., 2005; Henning et al., 2004; Maree, 2020; Resnik, 2020). These included the participants' consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and opportunity to withdraw at any given point without penalty. To ensure that we followed all ethical guidelines, we sought approval from the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, the MOET in Eswatini, and invited school principals to participate in the study. We informed the school principals of all research processes and assured them that we would use all information that they disclosed for research purposes only; that we would keep their identities anonymous and that the data reported would not be traceable to any specific participant or school (Creswell, 2018).

Analysis of Participants' Narratives

Principals' understanding of educational policy change

The research process started by focusing on the principals' understanding of educational policy change. P1-SA described policy change as follows: *"In my opinion policy, change in education refers to reforms or innovations. It is the changes that are deemed fit by the ministry for the smooth running of schools. These changes are documented after consultation with stakeholders and later made known to schools for implementation."* In contrast, P4-SD stated: *"It is changes brought by those in authority to guide the operations of schools or to guide the way we do things as desired by the Ministry of Education."* In sharing her

understanding of educational policy changes, P9-SI indicated that it is *"the improvement to existing operations, existing procedures which may be for better or worse depending on how they have been handled by the two parties involved being us principals and the ministry of education."* P10-SJ maintained that educational policy change was what brings change to how educational institutions or schools work. A policy that is documented must be implemented in schools to ensure uniformity. In other words, policy changes allow schools to operate in more or less the same way.

Participants in this study assigned similar connotations to the idea of educational policy change. Their understanding, however, appeared on various levels. The first level entailed the existence of educational policies that governed the day-to-day activities of the school. Some of the participants even used the term, "laws." This suggests that the participants in this study knew that policies were binding, which meant that they were to be followed. On a second level, participants recognised the need for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation when policies are adopted. According to them, this is to determine what works and what does not and must be changed. They believed that policies needed to be flexible and responsive in order to facilitate improvement.

The third level focused on a comprehensive review of education policies. Participants in our study viewed this level as a collaborative effort where all stakeholders must have a voice in policy development and review – they considered policy development as a collaborative effort. In their opinion, all principals' awareness of the FPE policy and their involvement in the policy development process was necessary for its successful implementation. Without their awareness, involvement, and understanding of the policy, the principals were likely not to successfully execute their role in the implementation process.

Participants' awareness of FPE policy

We deemed it necessary to establish participants' awareness of the FPE policy. Indicating his awareness of the policy, P6-SF said: *"I am aware of the policy. In fact, all public primary school principals in the country are aware of it and we are using it in the management of schools."* P3-SC agreed and said: *"we are aware of this policy; we use it in the running of our primary schools in the country. It has been in existence for years."* Sharing a similar view as the above participants, P9-SI added: *"yes, as principals, we know the FPE policy; it is currently governing the operations of public primary schools in the country."* Principal P8-SH affirmed: *"I know the policy. When it came to effect, we stopped charging fees to parents"*, and P10-SJ acknowledged awareness of the FPE policy. It is, however, remarkable to note that P11-SK

stated: *“I know about the policy, but you will be surprised that I have never seen that document. I have been to several meetings where free primary education issues were discussed but the policy has never been distributed.”*

Principals seemed to be generally aware of the policy, but as far as its content was concerned, most of them could not indicate what the policy entailed or not. Their awareness sounded more like shallow knowledge or hearsay about the policy. Significantly, some of the participants clearly stated that they had never seen the policy. Such utterances left a great deal of doubt about whether the principals were really implementing the FPE policy. A recurring question was how they could implement a policy that they had never seen. If the policy was their operational tool, how could they not have it in their possession? The fact that they had never seen the policy would surely have an impact on the quality of implementation. Their knowledge of the FPE policy, therefore, seemed to be a top-down knowledge imparted by the authoritative body.

Principals' narratives above seemed to indicate a lack of awareness and doubts about the terms and content of the policy. Having explored participants' awareness of the FPE policy, it was necessary to establish their involvement – especially in the early stages of policy development, namely the formulation stage. It was also necessary to determine whether principals had been involved in the development of the policy and had been prepared for its implementation.

There was a clear indication that participants were not part of the early stages of policy development and that they had not been involved in the formulation of the policy. This is partly because the policy was introduced in haste. It appears that implementation as a critical policy phase was reached and done to comply with a court verdict. Thus, principals were neither consulted nor involved in the formulation of the FPE policy. The government used its authority to put the policy in place and disregarded key stakeholders and phases, as participants indicated that they became aware of the policy through meetings arranged by the MOET of Eswatini. As it could be deduced from the participants' views, the policy document was a top-down issue and school principals did not have the opportunity to voice their views. This implies that the government consciously ran the risk of missing great ideas from participants in the policy-making process.

Moreover, it could be expected that participants would not be aware of the policy content if they had not been involved. It actually transpired that it was normal for principals not to be included in the development of policies. The government overlooked the principals' right to participation. It appears from the participants'

responses that the government ignored the principle of key stakeholders participating in policy issues and to understand the contents and origins of policies if proper implementation was desired. Importantly, participants in this study shared similar views on this matter regardless of the region from which they were – rural or urban.

Discussions of the Findings

The participating principals had a conceptual awareness of educational policy shifts. Their awareness and knowledge of the concept took various forms, including policy changes as regulators, policy changes as binding, educational policies as fluid and adaptable, and educational policy formulation as a joint endeavour. The depiction of policy change as binding was consistent with the views of Makinde (2005) and Melford (2019) who both define educational policy change as institutionalising new norms or processes, establishing laws, ordinances, mandates, and resolutions. That is, rules set standards in schools and help to keep educators and schools accountable. Policies assist schools in establishing rules and processes, thereby setting quality standards for learning and safety (Appleton, 2017).

The participants' views of educational policy development as a collaborative effort was in accordance with that of Bell and Stevenson (2006) and Elenkov and Manev (2005) who believe that policymaking requires continuous collaboration with stakeholders. The collaborative nature of policies enables schools' operation and allows for homogeneity in schools. The finding that educational policies must be flexible and adaptable was observed as being consistent with the view of Rue and Byars (2016) who suggest that educational policy changes hinge on the constant flow of new requirements, added responsibilities, and extended expectations.

Lack of Collaboration among Policymakers and Implementers

Importantly, Cerna (2013) and Elenkov and Manev (2005) point out that a lack of collaboration among policymakers and implementers can lead to policy failure. In addition, Nilsen (2015) suggests that the policy-making process should take into consideration the divergent views and interests of stakeholders, and the rationale for change should be communicated to and fostered in consensus with engaging stakeholders. This notion resonates and gives credence to Viennet and Ponts' (2017) theory, which identifies the policy process to entail inclusive stakeholder engagement as a key determinant. Participants in our study indicated that they were neither involved nor prepared for the implementation of the FPE policy.

Bradshaw and Buckner (2014), Kipkoech (2012), and Leithwood and Sun (2012) all agree

that principals are frequently overlooked in the early stages of policy development, but they take centre stage throughout implementation. These researchers' perspectives support those of Ellsworth (2000) who laments principals' lack of involvement in policy formation. Hope (2014) accurately asserts that the implementation process cannot be effective unless implementers are involved in the development process. This key finding lends weight to Curtain's (2000) argument that good policymaking necessitates interaction with the end users of the policy. As a result, according to Viennet and Pont's (2017) hypothesis, policy implementers execute duties of which they do not have a clear understanding.

Conclusion

With this study we did not only alert the reader to principals' experiences of policy change but also alluded to the importance of involving them in the policy process. We highlighted their democratic right to participation and to freedom of expression in matters that directly and/or indirectly affected the day-to-day operations in their schools. With the study we further contributed towards a theory that focuses on the holistic implementation of educational policy change through advocating for consultation and involvement of school principals in the policy process. The proposed theory is based on the notion that for any policy to be effectively implemented there must be extensive involvement of stakeholders and their views must be heard and recognised. Through the engagement of stakeholders, the MOET is likely to develop and implement context-responsive and sustainable policies.

However, the study was not without limitations. Only a qualitative research design was used. The results could have been different if a variety of research designs had been explored. In addition, the study solely included principals. If teachers and school committees had been included, the outcomes could have been different. Only two regions participated in the study. The findings could have been different if schools from all four regions in Eswatini had been included.

Acknowledgement

This article was funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) - <https://doi.org/10.13039/501-100001321>.

Authors' Contributions

GT executed the study and drafted and revised the article. MN supervised the study, reviewed and improved the drafts of the article, proofread the article and paid the language editing and processing charges.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral thesis of Goodness Xolile Tshabalala.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 7 December 2021; Revised: 11 November 2023; Accepted: 16 April 2024; Published: 31 May 2024.

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