An analysis of a horizontal public policy approach involving education

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An analysis of a horizontal public policy approach involving Education: A case study of the Healthy Child Manitoba strategy

Governmental administrations throughout the world are undertaking diverse initiatives to address the increasing level of uncertainty, volatility, and unpredictability that currently characterize the policymaking process. Public institutions, including provincial Departments of Education, are now called upon to address problems and challenges that have, according to many observers, scholars and political scientists, an increased level of interrelatedness and complexity (Bourgon, 2011; Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002; Lindquist, 2011, O’Toole, 1997). For this reason, it is becoming very difficult to consider problems in isolation from one another. To address the high level of complexity related to a variety of factors impacting on the wellbeing of children, the government of Manitoba has implemented in year 2000 the Healthy Child Manitoba (HCM) strategy.

The purpose of the presentation is to provide an overview of an on-going doctoral research which concerns itself with the examination this policy strategy as a case study to analyse horizontal and collaborative public-policy making processes that have an impact in education. The central question being examined by this study is to what extent, and under what circumstances, does the Healthy Child Manitoba cross-sectoral approach represents an innovative and valuable model for improving and extending the effectiveness of the development and implementation of educational policies.

The research is framed around a two-dimensional problem. The first dimension relates to an education policy problem that considers how the wellbeing of children is affected by numerous factors located inside but also outside of the formal education system. It is therefore proposed that the HCM strategic policy orientation is positioned and designed to address the needs of children from a variety of social contexts and perspectives. The second dimension of the problem relates to the public administration response required to address policy issues having a high level of complexity. It is suggested that linear and conventional policymaking processes used by governments in the past are no longer suffice to address complex issues (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). Rittel and Weber (1973), refer to ‘wicked problems’ when considering highly tenacious complex social issues.
There is a significant consensus in the literature indicating that wicked problems need to be addressed through more horizontal collaborative processes as there is a growing need for public institutions to respond to multifaceted horizontal problems with inherent conflicting values (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997; Sørensen & Torfing, 2008).

This research is conducted using a qualitative case study methodology. The data collection for the study is based on a documentation analysis as well as on semi-structured interviews conducted with elected and non-elected public policy actors as well as with non-public policy actors. All the respondents selected for the interviews have had some form of direct and meaningful engagement in policy activities conducted under HCM. The participants have directly been selected by the researcher and indirectly through the stakeholder organisations approached for the purpose of the study. While this research has not yet been completed, some emergent trends and challenges related to educational horizontal policy-making will be discussed.

As governmental institutions play a central role in defining educational policies, it is proposed that any innovative policy-making approaches implemented over a period of time deserves to be analysed to determine its strengths, weaknesses and areas of potential improvement. It is indeed anticipated that this study will uncover elements that are indicative of the success of the HCM strategy, through the identification of ‘lessons learned’ and ‘best practices’ as well as areas requiring attention and perhaps improvement. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, no specific research leading to any form of academic publications has been conducted with the aim of specifically analyzing the Healthy Child Manitoba horizontal policy strategy. It could therefore be argued that this research fills a gap. More specifically from an education perspective, it is relevant and important to examine how the cross-sectoral Healthy Child Manitoba strategy in its actual form adequately complements and supports the more centralized policy making role played by the Department of Education towards the achievement better learning outcomes for Manitoba children.
References


