

When Practice Belies Policy Intent: Cases from Turkey, Chile, and the United States

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Abstract

Policies that are intended to facilitate school counseling practice often fail to achieve their intended results and sometimes have unintended negative consequences that actually impede effective practice. This paper illustrates three such cases from Turkey, Chile, and the United States and analyzes the reasons behind policy failures. The paper also identifies some important considerations for effective policy development and implementation.

Keywords: school-based counseling, policy, policy development, evaluation, Turkey, Chile, United States

Introduction

Policy articulates desired ways of being for a society. Ideally, policy is meant to serve the public good. Starting as a broad statement of values, policy describes a set of conditions preferable to those currently in place. Embedded within any policy we should be able to find a *theory of action*, that is, a causal statement that *if we do X, Y will result* (Rallis & Carey, 2017).

We offer three examples: 1) If we teach character strengths, root values, and 21st Century skills through classroom guidance lessons, students' academic, career, and social-emotional outcomes will improve (Turkey); 2) If we require schools to have psychosocial interventions, the social-emotional climate will improve; if the social emotional climate improves, learning will increase (Chile); and 3) If students who are emotionally dysregulated in class go to the "quiet" room, they can take space, use coping strategies, and with staff support, regulate their emotions (United States).

However, designing, enacting, and implementing such cause and effect policies is not a clear and linear process. Written policy tends to be general and broad, thus, open to multiple and varying interpretations across individuals and contexts. Policymakers ignore prerequisite factors such as funding, human resources, and training. Policymakers also often fail to formatively evaluate policy implementation to determine whether if the anticipated actions actually occur. Relationships between policy and practice become convoluted and unpredictable, so programs meant to implement policies often yield troubling results.

Around the world, the work of school-based counselors and counselor educators is shaped by *policies* that communities and governments create and attempt to impose in ensure effective practice (Morshed & Carey, 2020). At times, these policies actually support effective practice; often they constrain or impede practice. Mismatches between policy and implementation occur. The three policies above illustrate this conundrum.

Case: Turkey

Classroom Guidance Programs (CGPs) are considered an important element of the comprehensive school counseling services. CGPs for all grade levels were designed by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) to improve social-emotional and career development, and the academic achievement of students (MoNE, 2018). The MoNE asserts that CGPs have been prepared based on basic principles of Turkish national education expressed in the National Education Basic Law No. 1739. The CGPs have been implemented for a long time in Turkey. The immediate key outcome indicators of the CGPs for all grade levels are clearly defined by the MoNE as “A program that aims to systematically present activities through group work in classrooms to meet the pre-defined program outcomes in the areas of students’ social-emotional, academic and career development” (MoNE, 2020, Article 3). The MoNE assumes that teaching certain skills, values, knowledge, and attitudes through the CGP will lead to academic, career, and social-emotional development of students.

In Turkey, the educational system is highly centralized, and therefore the CGPs framework and outcome indicators are determined by the MoNE. Classroom guidance teachers are responsible for implementing CGPs in collaboration with school counselors.

Although CGPs are prepared with good intention and with a solid rationale, they are not implemented in practice as intended. The examination system in Turkey is addressed in literature as one of the causes of this policy-practice gap. Nationwide central exams have an important place in the Turkish education system. Students must get a good score from these highly competitive nationwide central exams to be accepted into a school that provides high quality education. The literature indicates that teachers are usually under pressure to cover course curriculum in order to prepare students for the content of these examinations, and therefore, both teachers and students are reluctant to spend time related to the CGP (Öztürk, Esen & Siyez, 2020). Since success in these examinations is so critical for students, many things in the education system other than preparing students for the examination are of lesser importance.

As previously stated, classroom guidance teachers hold primary responsibility for implementing this program. Therefore, the knowledge and skills of these teachers are defined as key resources in the program logic model. Yet, from the literature, another reason for the gap between policy and practice is due to lack of competence of classroom guidance teachers in dealing with the subjects that constitute the content

of the program (Demirel, 2010; Öztürk, Esen & Siyez, 2020; Şarлак, 2019). For example, a wide variety of topics, such as ‘setting career and major selection goals’, ‘bullying’ and ‘teaching empathy’ are included in the program. However, classroom guidance teachers are not always equipped in these areas to provide assistance. In addition, teachers find instructional materials and activities used to teach the CGP objectives to be inadequate (Demirel, 2010; Öztürk, Esen & Siyez, 2020; Şarлак, 2019). It is clearly evident that the policymaker’s decisions are flawed by the assumption that teachers can easily teach the CGP subject matter with the guidance of exemplary activities which is provided.

Coordination and teamwork of classroom guidance teachers and school counselors is vital for the CGPs to be carried out as intended. The regulation states that “school counselors approve the classroom guidance plans, and monitor its implementation by the classroom guidance teachers”, and “implement activities that require special knowledge and skills in the field of psychological counseling within the scope of the classroom guidance program” (MoNE, 2020, Article 3). Moreover, school counselors are also responsible for giving support to classroom guidance teachers when they need any help in presenting the CGP content (MoNE, 2020). Even though input of school counselors is considered essential in the program logic model, the literature indicates that in many schools, counselor to student ratio is so high and/or school counselors are so overloaded with other duties, that they fail to give the needed support to the teachers and to monitor the program implementation (Karataş & Baltacı, 2013; Demirel, 2010; Öztürk, Esen & Siyez, 2020).

The unwillingness of classroom guidance teachers to implement CGPs is also a factor that hinders the implementation of the program (Karataş & Baltacı, 2013; Demirel, 2010; Gürgan, 2020; Şarлак, 2019; Tuzgöl Dost, 2020). Classroom guidance teachers display negative attitudes and beliefs toward the CGP for several reasons. For example, many believe the program creates so much paperwork, or they may not believe in its effectiveness. These negative attitudes create a low level of commitment, which in turn impedes the implementation of the program. Many times, teachers merely fill out the CGP documentation as required classroom protocol without actually fulfilling the activities at all. This, then, makes the CGP policy symbolic rather than a program serving a useful purpose.

Case: Chile

This case describes the acts and policies that influence Psychosocial Interventions (PI), focusing on Educational Preferential Subsidies (SEP) Law (MINEDUC, 2008, No. 20248), School Climate Policy (NPSC) (MINEDUC, 2019), and School Violence Law (2011), and identifies and illustrates some of the issues of implementing social and psychological support within the schooling system. Problems related to the policies and to the practice are explored.

The SEP law provides extra funding to schools that serve most vulnerable students; in exchange, these institutions need to implement improvement plans and

accountability practices. Also, schools are required to increase academic outcomes and other school climate indicators or suffer penalties if goals are not accomplished (Bellei & García Huidobro, 2006). Particularly, SEP resources in the school climate area could be spent on “psychological support and social assistance to students and their families” (MINEDUC, 2008, p. 7). Hence, schools started to hire social workers and psychologists (psychosocial pairs or PP) to carry out the so-called PI.

The policy emphasizes that positive school climate is fundamental for ensuring students learning, participation in class, and obtaining positive academic outcomes (Thapa et al., 2012; Wang & Degol, 2016). In fact, it is relevant from a human rights perspective because building a favorable school climate contributes to students’ emotional, social, and academic development (UNESCO, 2013). Thus, the PP’s role can be crucial for developing supportive interventions for the most disadvantaged students (Gatica, 2016; Cádiz & Manriquez, 2015). Consequently, the SEP policy aimed to compensate for the greater costs of educating the socioeconomically disadvantaged. In a more specific manner, the PI policy logic is that disadvantaged students require extra support. At the institutionalized level, PI support is expected to build positive school climate and increase the measure on school climate, with the result that learning will increase.

However, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have criticized these school climate policies. For example, López et al. (2018) explain difficulties between definitions of school climate and evaluation indicators by MINEDUC. Additionally, the MINEDUC published the NPSC 2019; this last edition focuses on managing school climate plans, introducing some elements related to PI, describing the positions, and briefly regulating PP’s multidisciplinary work without clarifying a model of intervention.

Similarly, Magendzo, Toledo and Gutiérrez (2013) stated that opposing perspectives compose the Act of School Violence. One perspective is control and sanction, establishing roles, responsibilities, and protocols to avoid penalties. Another view is to encourage the democratic process, emphasizing negotiated agreements (Magendzo, Toledo & Gutiérrez, 2013). Likewise, the act produces a system of cost and benefits for schools, providing the reduction of school violence treatment to follow the administrative process to avoid fees (Carrasco, López & Estay, 2012). Hence, these two opposite perspectives coexist, creating a paradoxical scenario between building a positive school climate and implementing punitive measures.

At the level of practitioners, studies affirm that professionals warn that the accountability process altered PI to focus strongly on producing evidence of having accomplished the improvement plan (Cárcamo-Vásquez, Jarpa-Arriagada & Castañeda-Díaz, 2020; Obando & Aicon, 2019) and hindered proposed new models as solutions to the contextual problems (Carrasco et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies show a weak Ministerial and local administrative support for PI and a lack of specific guidelines (Gatica, 2016; Carrasco et al., 2019). Moreover, psychologists’ role tends to individualize the problems and follow a clinic-medical model (López et al., 2011). Similarly, Apablaza (2017) states that specialized teams introduced a new type of

knowledge, using the diagnosis to develop a *valid truth* about vulnerabilities, students, and families that displaces pedagogic expertise and develops dynamics of inclusion-exclusion.

Hence, the school climate policies present difficulties in conceptualization and measurement and introduce different mandates between supporting positive school climate and promoting sanction and penalty approach. Additionally, in practice, the PI is affected by the accountability process, a lack of institutional support, and an individualistic intervention model. Consequently, even when PI's introduction came from a policy with an inclusion and equity approach, developing research to understand the gaps between the act and the PI's implementation is still essential. Specifically, the link between the PI and its contribution to building a positive school climate remains unclear. This gap between the policies and the PI implementation needs further investigation because it affects school communities and influences students' trajectories.

Case: United States

A small suburban public school district in the United States is committed to social, educational and community-based inclusion of students with emotional diagnoses. In support of this policy, the schools use a program called LINKS whose theory of action is: *if students are provided a safe, supportive environment that fosters positive connections with trustworthy adults, they will be able to apply learned skills to optimize their social emotional learning within their school community.*

In practice, the model does not work in the middle school. Two major problems exist with the program in that setting: 1) how students access the program; 2) what happens when students get to the space. Lack of consistency and teacher rationale present challenges related to how student get to the LINKS room. In some cases, if a student is acting out (refusing to do work, speaking loudly, or is disrespectful), the classroom teacher will send the student to the LINKS room. Teachers treat the decision as punishment while conveying the message that sending students to the LINKS room is better than sending them to the office. Thus, the teacher removes a *disruption*, not a student with disruptive behavior, from the classroom without addressing the problematic behavior. The student may be acting out because the work is too difficult, the student is bored or is seeking attention; however, the teacher avoids examining the behavior. By sending students to the program, teachers fail to examine and address antecedent behaviors or any possible triggers. "Go to LINKS" is an easy command that presumably allows the teacher to return her attention back to the class at hand and removes the responsibility from the teacher. For example, if directions are unclear and a student shouts, "This is stupid!", the teacher may simply tell the student to leave the room without asking why he said this. The teacher removes herself from the equation and may justify her actions by reporting the student was dysregulated and simply acted out. On the other hand, some teachers refuse to let a student go to LINKS when the student requests it. This teacher may

report the student was not dysregulated or will claim the student only asked to leave the room as a way to avoid work. In these cases, the student may then escalate behaviors until the teacher is compelled to address them. In this case, the student may be instructed, “Go to the office!” where *punishment* is then expected.

In both scenarios the motives are similar, and the results are the same. Either, the teacher does not respect student behaviors as a function of the classroom or ignores that the student may have an emotional disability. In the former, the teacher is not questioning why a student acts out but is reacting to the behavior, not the cause. In the latter case, the teacher does not understand what this student’s emotional disability is and how it presents in the classroom. Either way the teacher misses out on an opportunity to help the student understand her disability or use appropriate coping skills to regulate himself. In the first scenario the teacher is using LINKS as a punishment, not understanding why the student is acting out. In the second scenario the teacher is not using LINKS appropriately, denying the student access to therapeutic support by sending her to the office to be punished. In both cases the student’s needs are not being met. The student is not allowed appropriate access to the therapeutic classroom.

The second problem with this program is what happens when the student arrives in the LINKS room. At least four scenarios occur, only one of which is positive. The positive scenario is when the student arrives to the room a trained staff member greets him, helps him to de-escalate and use appropriate coping skills. Unfortunately, sometimes when a student is sent to the room, a sign on the door reads: “LINKS is closed”. This happens because the teacher hastily sent the student without calling to confirm that a staff member is present in the LINKS room. Other times, the student arrives to a staffed room, but the staff member does not choose an appropriate method for helping the student. Perhaps the student is angry, the staff member assumes he was disruptive, and simply tells him to do work. The student, in a heightened state, is unable to focus on the schoolwork and then gets into a power struggle with the staff member. In another situation, the student arrives to the room, and the staff member directs the student to sit for five minutes to “calm down”. This action is appropriate until the staff member repeatedly asks the student if she is “ok”, well before the five minutes expire, causing the student to re-engage in negative behaviors. With the exception of the first scenario, the objective of providing a safe environment that allows student to apply learned skills is not achieved.

The overarching failure of the policy of sending students to a therapeutic classroom when dysregulated is due to poorly trained staff. Classroom teachers are not instructed how to approach students with an emotional disability, when to use LINKS, and how to refer students. The paraprofessionals in the program are not trained in how to address students in different states of dysregulation. Finally, the adjustment counselor is not trained to train staff members how to best approach each individual student.

Analysis and conclusions

All three of these scenarios illustrate instances where policies fail to achieve their desired intent and actually detract from school-based counselors' ability to help students. We suggest that these failures resulted from two all too common policymaking practices: basing a policy on a "naïve" and under-developed theory of action or "logic model" and failing to formatively evaluate policy implementation.

The Chile and US cases represent prime examples of policymaking that is based policy on a "naïve" and under-developed theory of action. The Chile case illustrates how a fuzzy definition of key element of the theory of action (i.e. school climate) led to multiple interpretations of appropriate practice and widespread use of conflicting approaches—many of which would not actually be expected to align with the desired policy objective. The US case illustrates the use of a theory of action that is "naïve" in several respects including its assumptions that classroom teachers either already had or would automatically develop the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes to make decisions about the appropriateness of sending students to a therapeutic classroom and to employ an effective process referral. It also naively assumed that school-based counselors in the therapeutic classrooms had the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes to work effectively with a broad range of students who would arrive on a haphazard "schedule". Fleshing out the theory of action before formulating policy would have identified many of the complexities involved in implementation and would have identified needed supports (e.g. procedures to train teachers in referral practices) to help insure an implementation that would have led to improved practice. Engaging school-based practitioners (in this case especially classroom teachers and school-based counselors) in the process of elaborating a full logic model would have been especially helpful.

The Turkish case is a prime example of what can happen when policy is implemented without a formative evaluation. In this case, several factors conspired to lead to policy failure (e.g. teachers and students reluctance to allocate time for program participation because of the pressure to devote maximal time to instructional activities that seem more directly connected to academic achievement; and, school-based counselors' inability to fully implement the program due to conflicting responsibilities and work overload). These impediments to effective program implementation would have been readily identified in a formative evaluation of implementation leading to modifications in policy and/or its mode of implementation. This formative evaluation could have been conducted with a small group of schools prior to full roll out of the policy or as the first phase of policy implementation. While there are some costs in both time and money associated with such formative evaluation, the alternative is wasting educational resources on the widespread implementations that cannot produce their intended benefits.

In all three cases described in this paper policy failure was anticipatable before implementation and/or could be easily detected at early stages of implementation. Taking care to 1) fully develop the theory of action underlying school-based

counseling policy using input from stakeholders, and 2) formatively evaluating school-based counseling policy implementation at its earliest stages are two effective strategies for ensuring that policies actually result in intended improvements in practice and contribute to the public good.

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