

# Listening and Learning from the Field: Tales of Policy Implementation and Situated Practice

MILBREY W. MCLAUGHLIN

*Stanford University*

## DISCOVERING THE IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEM

Why are policies not implemented as planned? Why are classroom practices so hard to change? The “implementation problem” was discovered in the early 1970’s as policy analysts took a look at the school level consequences of the Great Society’s sweeping education reforms. The 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), with its support for compensatory education, innovation, strengthened state departments of education, libraries and, subsequently, bilingual education, signaled the substantive involvement of the federal government in local educational activities. ESEA’s comprehensive intergovernmental initiatives meant that implementation no longer was just primarily a management problem, confined to relations between a boss and a subordinate, or an administrator and a teacher, or even to processes within a single institution. Implementation of the Great Society’s education policies stretched across levels of government – from Washington to state capitals to local districts and schools – and across agents of government-legislative, executive, administrative. As federal, state and local officials developed responses to these new education policies, implementation issues were revealed in all their complexity, intractability, and inevitability.

Discovery of the general “implementation problem” came as something of a surprise to planners and analysts. Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky in 1973 were among the first to herald implementation issues in federal public policy. They detailed “How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; or, Why it’s amazing that Federal programs work at all,” and recounted a “saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes.” Implementors, they reported, did not always do as told (as proponents of scientific management would have it) nor did they always act to maximize policy objectives (as many economists would have it). Instead those responsible for implementation at various levels of the policy system responded in what often seemed quite idiosyncratic, frustratingly unpredictable, if not downright resistant ways. The result was not only program outcomes that fell short of expectations but also enormous variability in what constituted a “program” in diverse settings.

## THE RAND CHANGE AGENT STUDY

The Rand Change Agent study was being designed and carried out in this climate of alarmed discovery. If Pressman and Wildavsky wanted to know about the complexities of policy implementation more generally, we were interested specifically in how federal education policies made their way through levels of government and practice. From 1973 through 1978, the Rand Corporation carried out a national study of four federally funded so-called “change agent” programs, policies intended to introduce and support innovative practices in the public schools<sup>1</sup> The projects included in the Change Agent Study were the products of federal policies conceived in the late 1960’s, and local plans developed in the early to mid-1970’s. They represented the first significant federal-level attempt to stimulate change in local educational practices and were based in relatively unexamined assumptions about the problem of change in public schools and the role of government (or policy) in affecting it. Policy makers formulating these early federal education initiatives assumed a relatively direct relationship between federal policy “inputs”, local responses, and program “outputs.” Policy of that period generally ignored the contents of what economists called the “black box” of local practices, beliefs and traditions. The theory behind these substantively distinct federal programs was that more money or better ideas – enhanced “inputs” – would enable local educators to improve school practice. A cynical, retrospective description of that era of federal education policy might dub it the “missing input model of education policy.”

The Rand Change Agent study differed from previous large education research studies in two important ways. One, it combined quantitative survey methods with qualitative field work strategies.<sup>2</sup> Two, the study asked questions of “how” and “why” as well as looking at what local implementors did with federal program funds and frameworks. Field research was key to Rand’s attempt to unpack the implementation perspective.

Rand found that local initiatives supported by federal funds were by and large consistent in focus and direction with what policy makers had in mind. However, Rand analysts found that project “adoption” was only the beginning of the story: Adoption of a project consistent with federal goals did not ensure successful implementation. Further, Rand found that even successful implementation did not predict longrun continuation of projects initiated with federal funds once these funds were withdrawn. The Change Agent study concluded that the net return to the general investment was the adoption of many innovations, the successful implementation of few, and the long-run continuation of still fewer.

A general finding of the Change Agent study has become almost a truism: *it is exceedingly difficult for policy to change practice*, especially across levels of government. Contrary to the 1:1 relationship assumed to exist between policy and practice, the Change Agent study demonstrated that the nature, amount and pace of change at the local level was a product of local factors that were largely beyond the control of higher-level policy makers. To further complicate matters, these local factors

changed over time and so created substantively and strategically different settings for policy. Specifically, Rand concluded that:

*Implementation dominates outcome.*

Local choices about how (or whether) to put a policy into practice have more significance for policy outcomes than do such policy features such as technology, program design, funding levels, or governance requirements. Change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit. What actually happens as a result of a policy depends on how policy is interpreted and transformed at each point in the process, and finally on the response of the individual at the end of the line.

*Policy can't mandate what matters.*

What matters most to policy outcomes are local capacity and will. The local expertise, organizational routines, and resources available to support planned change efforts generate fundamental differences in the ability of practitioners to plan, execute or sustain an innovative effort. The presence of the will or motivation to embrace policy objectives or strategies is essential to generate the effort and energy necessary to a successful project. Local capacity and will not only are generally beyond the reach of policy, they also change over time. The Change Agent study described how local events such as teachers' strikes, fiscal retrenchment, desegregation orders, or enrollment decline can negatively affect both capacity and will as they engender competing pressures and define constraints upon local action.<sup>3</sup> Further, teachers' will or motivation is contingent on the attitudes of school administrators or district officials. So while teachers in a site may be eager to embrace a change effort, they may elect not to do so, or to participate on only a *pro forma* basis, because their institutional setting is not supportive. Consequently, the enthusiasm engendered in teachers may come to little because of insufficient will or support in the broader organizational environment, which is hard to orchestrate by means of federal (or even state) policy. Teachers' motivations and actions are embedded in a larger social and political context that mediates their responses to policy.

*Local variability is the rule; uniformity is the exception.* While classrooms, schools and school districts share common features – curriculum structures, grade structures, student placement policies as examples – the Change Agent study found that they also differed in fundamental and consequential ways. A high school English course in a wealthy suburban classroom differs substantially from a course offered under the same title in an inner city school. The problems confronting California school administrators differ markedly from those faced by colleagues in Kansas.

*Implementation signals mutual adaptation.*

Local implementation was revealed as a process of mutual adaptation between program or project percepts and local realities. Sometimes this adaptation meant dilution or derailment of project objectives. Other times these local responses provided important local knowledge and modification. Traditionally, variability has been an anathema to policy makers and cast as the plague of efforts to reform schools because it signaled uneven local responses to policy objectives. Also, variability has been interpreted as warning of trouble in the system. The Change Agent study raised the possibility that mutual adaptation and local variability may be a good thing – that it could signal a healthy system, one that is shaping and integrating policy in ways best suited to local resources, traditions and clientele. “Adaptation” replaced “adoption” as a goal for education change policies largely as response to these Change Agent study findings.

The Change Agent study underscored the critical role of local implementation and the “street level bureaucrats” who decide about classroom practices and the factors that affect teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup> Beyond identifying that important perspective, however, the Change Agent study and other implementation research provided only limited understanding of teachers’ realities and the influences that shape what goes on in schools and classrooms. From its perspective on local implementation, the Change Agent study thus framed a major challenge for analysis: *linking macro and micro levels of policy, analysis, and action*. Macro analyses and policies operate at the level of the system, and stress regularities of process and organizational structures as stable outlines of the policy process. Individual action, seen through the macro lens, is understood in terms of position in a relational network. Micro analyses, policies, and perspectives, conversely, operate at the individual level and interpret organizational action as problematic and unpredictable outcomes of “street level bureaucrats,” or autonomous individuals. The Change Agent study elaborated the macro perspective on implementation and practice, but provided little insight into how and why local implementors-most especially teachers – respond as they do. The Change Agent study left unanswered the central question: What are the factors that affect teachers’ responses to policies aimed at changing classroom practices?

## CONTEXTS THAT AFFECT TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, begun in 1987, assumed as its mission understanding the factors that enable or constrain teachers’ work, and expressly set about to take up the analytic challenge posed by implementation research.<sup>5</sup> What are the contexts that matter for teaching and learning? How can understanding of teachers’ workplace contexts inform policy responses to the “implementation problem?”

*Taking teachers' perspective*

The Context Center research attempted to move from an “outside in” view on practice to an “insiders’” perspective on the factors that influence teaching and learning. From a teachers’-eye view, what dimensions of the school setting are most influential in shaping the ways teachers think about practice and what they do in the classroom?

Rand’s Change Agent study, and other subsequent research that probed relations between policy and practice, involved extensive field work and included teachers’ responses to questions of policy implementation and program effects. The first and difficult lesson learned as we piloted our interview protocol was that research consistent with an insider’s view required more than mere solicitation of teachers’ views on policy and practice. Research aimed at understanding teachers’ perspective needed to look at the world of everyday practice through the same lens. The so-called “backward mapping” strategies favored by policy analysts – interview and data collection procedures which sought to map up through the policy system from the classroom, understanding the transformations and decisions made at each level [as Pressman and Wildavsky sketched in 1973]–turned out to be a top down or outsider strategy because the categories assumed by interviews with teachers reflected realities of the policy system, not the classroom.<sup>6</sup> Teachers, we quickly learned, do not backward map; they struggle daily with the multiple and diverse demands on the classroom energy, expertise, and capacity. Questions framed by a backward mapping approach were analysts’ questions, not teachers’ questions. Teachers’ maps, we learned, were largely indifferent to the topography and landmarks of education policy. Teachers rarely saw policy or organizational boundaries as critical influences on their work. They pointed instead to colleagues, networks and non-formal agencies and professional organizations, and other activities that tend to fall outside formal policy or organization lines as significant to their conception of practice and career.

The first thing we learned from the Context Center work even before we launched into our program of research had to do with analytic lens. “Micro,” we discovered, was not simply the other end of “macro.” Rather these perspectives represented two importantly different conceptual schemes and analytic frames. The answer to an analytic question posed by the implementation research, most specifically the Change Agent study, “Does the complementarity of macro/micro realities mean that a single model of analysis can be applied up and down the system?”, was no. Different theoretical perspectives and understandings applied to each. Teachers’ perspectives on teaching and learning are rooted in fundamentally different premises of action, if not different goals, than those of the outside researcher, policy analyst or policy maker. These initial lessons were reinforced and elaborated throughout the course of our research project and generated insights and understanding which otherwise would have been hidden from view.

Once we asked “what’s it like to teach here,” and “what are the factors that influence how you feel about yourself as a teacher,” teachers enabled us to see school-teaching from their view.