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Rethinking the Mediation of Policy and Programmes Across the Design and Implementation Tiers of Government: How to Minimise the loss of “Policy Voltage”

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Introduction

The gap between policy intentions and outcomes, dubbed ‘implementation incongruence’ by Wildavsky in 1973 is a major cause for concern in education improvement as well as in other areas of the public service. The same can be said about national programmes that are implemented through multiple tiers of government. Two education programme implementation case studies discussed in the latter sections of this paper demonstrate how programme intentions are diluted by time they reach the intended points of effect, in the same way that an electricity line loses voltage over a distance. Questions are posed about the practice of bureaucracy, which is rooted in hierarchy and red tape and is highly susceptible to complex human behavioural dynamics, and its effects on realising policy intentions.

This paper uses the concept of mediation to express the fact that achieving policy effects requires much more than linear and simplistic implementation. The term ‘policy mediation’ thus refers to the negotiated transfer, processing and implementation of policy across various tiers of government down to the intended levels of impact. While policy implementation literature of the past half century provides many insights into the challenges and opportunities for improving the mediation of policy, the paper takes the view that the insights offered need to be tested against current environments, with a better appreciation of the social and organisational dynamics in play.

Discourses developed in the attempt to shed light on the blockages in and opportunities for better implementation of policies and programmes cover, among others, ‘the role of street-level bureaucrats’; meanings and conceptions of policy; implementation incongruence; effect of ‘the chain’ and ‘thickening of the bureaucracy’; and striking a balance between ‘prescription and discretion’ within the organisational behaviour realm.

In South Africa, the policy mediation chain is laid out in the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) 27 of 1996, which spells out the policy mediation route that stretches from the national level to the schools. The Act presents the guiding provisions for the delivery of education as a concurrent function of both the national and the provincial tiers of government. The NEPA makes provision for the national Minister of Education to determine policy for ‘... planning, provision, financing, staffing, coordination, management, governance, programmes, monitoring, evaluation and well-being of the education system ...’ and the determination of national policy. The implementation of educational services is the responsibility of the provincial departments of education (PEDs), which are, in turn, expected to cascade programmes to districts, circuits and schools through delegations that are captured either in the South African Schools Act 96 of 1996 or provincial legislation and regulations. These sets of laws, regulations and recurrent official memoranda are expected to bring into effect the intentions of national policies and programmes.

As demonstrated in the two case studies that will be presented, gaps in policy implementation manifest even within the policy cascade architecture outlined in national policies and legislation.

The conceptual understanding drawn from the literature is used to explore the weak mediation outcomes demonstrated in two case study programmes implemented by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The paper takes as a premise that good policies and programmes achieve desirable effects if at least two fundamental conditions are met: the design of the policy or programme is undertaken on the basis of a good understanding of the implementation environment by the policy makers – the constitutive governance level; and there is detailed planning and judicious implementation by the implementers – at the directorial and operational governance levels of policy implementation[i]. As Brodtkin posits, ‘policy making might benefit from giving more attention to matters of policy delivery up front’[ii].

The central interest of the paper is to identify practical ways in which education officials across both the development and the implementation divide and non-state change agents can support policy and programme mediation.

The following sections discuss a few concepts from policy implementation science and present and discuss the two case studies of policy and programme mediation. The paper concludes with some proposals on how to improve policy mediation.

Understanding ‘Implementation Incongruence’

Some attempts made to understand blockages to successful policy implementation have produced less than desirable results because these efforts elected to use one analytic framework over others or stopped short of creating comprehensive analytic/operational frameworks and tools that can be applied to address the challenges. In this way, some empirical evaluations of policy mediation processes have resulted in blaming one tier of the education hierarchy

I or the other, one actor or the other (e.g. policy makers or implementers) or either the policy content or the implementation process itself. It is for this reason that a framework and an instrument to facilitate the assessment and improvement of policy mediation are presented at the end of this paper.

The Value in Adopting A Blended Policy Lens

Analyses of policy implementation have largely been undertaken through either a rational, a social or a political lens. Rooted in the ‘calculative’ reasoning approach to policy analysis, the rational perspective is couched in the liberal pluralist approach, which is interested in the coherence of policies and views policy-making as a separate activity from policy administration. This approach would place more emphasis on top-down, prescriptive and accountability-based mechanisms to improve mediation. The interpretative policy analysis approach conceives of policy as socially experienced and interpreted by various policy actors. Within this thinking, effective policy mediation depends on the interpretation of the policy, which is viewed as a product of the complex interaction of policy actors with different policy knowledge, values and beliefs. Within this view, policy implementation is either facilitated or hamstrung by social dynamics, interactions and mediation complexities. The political perspective, on the other hand, emphasises how power, interests and influences play out in understanding policy and its mediation. It assumes that interests, agendas and the relative power of different policy interest groups or communities determine policy mediation. In the battle of these value-systems, successful policy implementation hinges on effective management of ideological interests, structures, social interactions, power and influence[iii].

The relevance of the three perspectives is that they respectively spotlight management challenges, the existence of policy groupings, and different political enclaves that form part of policy making and implementation dynamics. It is therefore ideal to take a balanced, eclectic approach when considering matters of policy mediation.

Organisational Design as a Policy Mediation Dynamic

The seminal work of Wildavsky in 1973 [iv] generated new understandings of how to forge subsequent links in the causal chain of policy and programme implementation, especially in multi-tier systems. The work resulted in the realisation, among others, that the longer the chains of causality, the more numerous the reciprocal relationships and the more complex implementation becomes[v].

This theorisation sponsors a proposal that effective policy mediation requires an organisational setting that has fewer ‘clearance points’ or requirements, alternatively greater centralisation of the implementation and greater clarity of the policy goals. However, the reality is that the public service is made up of multiple semi-autonomous centres of decision-making nested in multiple jurisdictional levels [vi].

The centralisation of policy implementation is possible through mechanisms such as ‘special projects’ and ring-fenced budgets (national grants) that are driven from the central level. While changing the multiple jurisdictional nature of the public service is an unthinkable option, and the centralisation option has its limitations in as far as it misses out on the advantages of the social capital and capacity in a decentralised system and risks weakening the agency of the lower levels of the system in due course. Suggestions for organisational design and development relating to policy and programme mediation highlight the need for detailed planning of policy and programme implementation, the central role played by leadership, implementation fidelity, evaluation and feedback, and creating an enabling environment – enabling agency. Human Behaviour in Policy Mediation

Lipsky’s project of the 1980s on ‘street-level bureaucracy’ [vii] (1980) produced a fresh understanding of the role of individual officials in policy mediation, bringing an understanding from an inside perspective and a greater willingness to understand bureaucrats’ policy implementation behaviour in terms of their contexts and the challenges they face. In his analysis of the role of bureaucrats, Lipsky brought to light the daily struggles that so many public service

workers endure which lead them to introduce – complex adaptations that lead to informal patterns of practice that can reshape policy delivery, albeit in ways that are readily visible and, certainly, are not made transparent through the performance metrics [viii].

He argued that ‘deviant’ or ‘subversive’ behaviour from a principal-agent perspective may have little to do with practitioners’ personal policy preferences or fealty to the organisational hierarchy but is better understood as an adaptation to conditions of work. Bureaucrats tend to do the best they can do under the conditions.

While Lipsky’s thesis, which motivates for room for bureaucrats’ discretion in policy implementation, holds value, it can be criticised for deemphasising the role that managerial strategies can play in large bureaucracies in achieving the desirable policy outcomes. Furthermore, the notion of discretion assumes that ‘street-level bureaucrats’ possess the necessary capabilities to cogently exercise that discretion.

However, as Lipsky correctly concluded, the solution is neither management control nor the autonomy of the implementing bureaucrats, but a complex dialectic. For those who might misunderstand his theory to indicate street-level autonomy, a growing body of management studies clarifies that discretion operates within limited degrees of freedom and is embedded in an organisational context that shapes the possibilities for its use.[ix]

The major contribution of street-level management research is that it also reveals how organisational conditions and management strategies affect the probabilities of individuals acting the way they do in policy implementation.

Policy Mediation Readiness and Impact Assessment

To take the discussion to the level of practice, it is necessary to pose questions on how we know whether organisations are ready to implement policies and whether the implementation is reaching the desired impact. In 1998, Cuban [x] provided a useful set of five criteria for evaluating the implementation of reforms, and which should be addressed by policy elites and policy entrepreneurs in their design of educational

reforms. The first three of the standards are effectiveness, fidelity and popularity.

According to Cuban, policy makers, administrators and researchers most frequently use these three standards to evaluate reform viability. The remaining two standards, used less frequently, are adaptiveness and longevity of the policies. Consequently, the application of all five criteria helps to move the discussion forward on whether 'success' is defined as a matter of problem solving or of exercised control.

Weighing in on this discussion, Rorrer & Skrla argued that 'Cuban's standard of adaptiveness...is the flip side of the fidelity standard' [xi]. They observed in an education district in the US how productive transformation of remote accountability policies into tangible local results depended on the officials' ability to apply the standard of adaptiveness.

Pitfalls and Opportunities in Achieving Implementation Success

The following are some of the hindrances to effective policy mediation that can be discerned in the literature. These are discussed herein to bolster the analytic frameworks for policy and programme mediation.

- Christmas-tree approach to policy and programme implementation.

Detailed policy implementation planning is often non-existent or lacks prioritisation. Sebing and Bryk [xii] considered plans lacking in prioritisation to be the result of a tendency to adopt every glittery new programme, with little coherence and planning being exercised - the 'Christmas tree approach'. However, policies should be based on bigger intentions that require their implementers to make choices regarding which activities to prioritise, how to sequence them and how to distribute the levels of effort accordingly. Not going the extra mile to make the necessary choices is the easiest way out of policy implementation. Unfortunately, such incomplete planning in policy implementation breeds unproductive busyness and removes the basis for strategic resource

investment and accountability.

- Creative insubordination

This challenge entails overt or subtle subversion of new policies, which may manifest as a result of opposition to management structures, tension between the policy makers and implementers or dissociation of the implementation from the policy intentions, values or possible consequences. Subversion requires careful, continuous assessment and, even more importantly, a building of critical initial support for new policies.

- Illusive balance between prescription and discretion

According to Lipsky, street bureaucrats tend to be arbitrary and capricious in the exercise of discretion, which can result in redirected policy implementation and procedural errors. Prescription, on the other hand, is criticised for its tendency to take away adaptiveness and shift the focus from the achievement of policy outcomes to control. The argument here is that effective mediation would be achieved if a balance is struck between prescription and discretion, contingent on implementation taking into account the context and complex interaction of factors including the professional capacity of the bureaucrats, agency incentives, and the match between the demands of policy implementation and the resources available to meet them. As argued by Lipsky, in such situations, bureaucrats find coping mechanisms within the mix of prescriptive and discretionary tactics. For instance, Rorrer [xiii] found that education officials, as the key players in mediating policy intents and outcomes, relied on building relationships around the policy intents. Such actions would entail a cultivation of interactions around the policy, a creation of greater awareness and demonstration of the compatibility of the policy and programmes with the realities of the officials' work lives[xiv]. In the cases observed by Rorrer,[xv] district leaders used various management tactics to model expectations and set goals, praised progress and achievement, held others accountable and gave assurances that everybody was on the same page. It can be deduced from this demonstration that effective policy mediation requires continuous championing by the leaders of the organisations responsible for policy implementation.

In its endeavour to construct a conceptual framework for policy mediation, this paper takes the view that all the various dimensions and polar approaches are crucial to understanding the dynamics of policy implementation. However, the need for an eclectic approach, sensitive to all dimensions, sequenced appropriately, and consciously weighted in accordance with the dynamic requirements of the programmes and policies in question, is viewed as central and key. The extent to which programmes are technical or normative, the implementation context pertaining to the number and profile of policy implementers, the layers of mediation, and resources, both material and non-material, are some of variables that have to be considered when deciding on a deliberate set of policy mediation levers.

The Case of the National Reading Strategy

In 2016, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) [xvi] confirmed the reading challenge among South African learners. The study concluded that 80% of Grade 4 learners were unable to read for meaning in their mother tongues. In 2017, the NECT introduced the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) that, since inception, has reached the full national cohort of subject advisors who support languages and over 40 000 of the estimated 100 000 teachers who teach reading in primary schools. The PSRIP was designed for English First Additional Language (EFAL), as a starting point to tackling the reading challenges. In 2019, the country adopted a National Reading Sector Plan, which outlined how the various tiers of the education system should focus on developing a few strategies that could be cascaded to classrooms. As was the case with many other programmes, the implementation of the PSRIP was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted education globally. The follow-up PIRLS study of 2021 pointed to a further decline in reading ability, with an increase of 1,7% (to 81%) in the number of learners who could not read for meaning. This decline saw the DBE revising the National Reading Strategy in July 2023 and advising provincial departments, districts and schools to do the same so as to build a basis for driving intentional and focused reading improvement.

Both the 2019 plan and the revised 2023 strategy were considered and approved by the three interprovincial governance structures that are expected to oversee to their implementation: the Council of Education Ministers (CEM), Heads of Education Committee (HEDCOM) and the Teacher Development and Curriculum Management (TDCM) subcommittee of the HEDCOM. The team that conceptualised both the sector plan and the strategy concede that the development of the sector plan focused its consultations more on generating expert inputs into the plan rather than on the mediation of the policy to the implementers. The strategy, which was a second run at accelerating reading improvements, involved extensive but rapid provincial roadshows led by the Director General, reaching over 90% of primary school principals across all provinces. The roadshows were large and rapid gatherings that sometimes accommodated up to 1 000 principals, with average presentation slots of 30 minutes to an hour. An observable innovation of the roadshow was that it combined the presentation of the PIRLS results and the revised strategy to demonstrate practical ways to address the reading deficits. The Minister of Basic Education also led some consultations targeting reading experts and the civil society sector.

In February 2024, a rapid assessment was undertaken by the NECT involving 312 teachers drawn from a realised sample of 114 schools across six of the nine provinces. The appraisal set out to establish if school stakeholders knew about the expectation that they would be implementing the strategy and, if they were, to assess whether they were making implementation gains. The results of the survey, summarised in the table below, show that less than half the teachers were aware of the National Reading Strategy and had developed a school-specific plan to implement the policy.

Table 1: Teachers awareness of the NRS and plans developed

Province	Awareness of National Plan (%)	School has a Plan (%)
EC	46	56
KZN	36	55
LP	42	49
MP	51	69
NC	23	7
NW	49	60
National	42	49
Average		

While knowledge of the national strategy or production of the school plan do not equate to the policy intention, the statistics suggest poor mediation of the information necessary for the achievement of the strategy's intentions. The teachers' knowledge of the strategy ranged from 23% in the Northern Cape to 51% in Mpumalanga, suggesting a 28-percentage point variability in the strategy's penetration. The interprovincial variability is even greater in terms of the implementation statistics, where the Northern Cape recorded 7% compared to 69% in Mpumalanga. It is notable that a lesser number of teachers indicated that they knew of the national strategy compared to the number who indicated that they had developed school level strategies. This pattern may be indicative of an effective mediation driven at provincial level.

The PSRIP implementation team acknowledge that both the first and second programming initiatives demonstrate some obvious shortcomings regarding mediation, including no formal sign-off of the sector plan and the strategy and light-touch mediation programming, which may have led to the 'fizzling out' of the mediation transactions close to the schools. Learning from these initial efforts, the DBE is undertaking one-on-one meetings with the provincial departments to bolster mediation of the policy.

The case of the implementation of the 'User Acceptance Testing' Programme

The NECT, in close collaboration with the PEDs and the principal branches of the DBE, has been working to modernise the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS). This collective effort is aimed at replacing the current system with an open-source solution with enhanced functionality and an improved user experience. Key improvements include a more intuitive user interface, cloud integration for real-time data access, intergovernmental integration, and improved data security. These upgrades are designed to streamline school management processes.

The modernised system will also offer enhanced reporting and analytics capabilities, empowering schools to make data-driven decisions, circuit and district officials to support schools, provincial departments to use data to support strategic

initiatives, and the national department to monitor policy implementation effectiveness.

The modernisation efforts are focused on re-platforming the existing rich system onto an open-source platform, ensuring the system's scalability to handle growing user numbers and volumes of data and improving its interoperability with other educational technologies. Enhanced technical support and training resources will empower users to utilise the system effectively. Overall, the SA-SAMS modernisation project is poised to create a more efficient, secure and user-friendly administrative tool that supports South African schools' needs and contributes significantly to better educational outcomes.

In June 2023, the SA-SAMS modernisation project completed the solution delivery phase for three of its four core modules (Manage School, Manage Learner and Manage Staff), and the system was handed over to the DBE's Education Management Information System (EMIS) team for User Acceptance Testing (UAT). Despite the collective efforts, the initial UAT conducted by the DBE and PEDs from September to November 2023 was unsuccessful, bringing significant management and planning issues to light.

▪ Initial UAT (September-November 2023)

Only eight out of 130 targeted users participated in the initial UAT phase, and they failed to perform any testing. This failure was attributed to inadequate management and a lack of developed test cases, underscoring the pressing need for a more structured and comprehensive approach to testing.

▪ Testing Cycle 1 (11-12 December 2023)

In the first formal testing cycle, 937 administrators and principals were invited to participate virtually in four testing sessions. Two hundred and thirty users attended (25%), and 175 (76%) completed the testing. The project acknowledged that the timing of this testing, which took place during the end-of-year school closure, was problematic.

▪ Testing Cycle 2 (19-27 February 2024)

In the second cycle, 3 049 administrators, educators and principals were invited to test the system independently over five sessions. There was a low turnout, with only 393 users (13%) participating and

105 (26%) completing the tests. Notably, efforts were made to boost participation and underscore the importance of UAT through bilateral meetings between the DBE and the PED EMIS teams, a positive stride towards successful implementation.

▪ [Testing Cycle 3 \(18 March-10 April 2024\)](#)

A total of 2 450 schools from various provinces were invited to participate in the testing. Schools from five provinces (Eastern Cape [14 schools], Free State [55 schools], KwaZulu-Natal [58 schools], Limpopo [25 schools], and Mpumalanga [19 schools]) attended and participated in eight role-based testing sessions. Despite increased efforts, engagement remained a challenge because the project was not a priority focus, and the EMIS teams and schools were focused on operational priorities.

▪ [Testing Cycle 4 \(22-23 April 2024\)](#)

This cycle focused on selecting quality testers (school officials who were experts in the current system and had an advanced understanding of school operations and policies), identified by PEDs as ‘super testers’, to recommend sign-off for the solution. Super testers included administrators (10 per province), educators (20 per province) and principals (10 per province). However, only 60% of the super testers attended the virtual testing, and only 17% submitted results. Following this, Limpopo held physical testing sessions with the identified super testers, which entailed training all testers at a single physical venue, followed by testing by the super testers and then submission of the completed testing feedback forms. Limpopo’s 90% feedback submission rate highlighted the effectiveness of physical rather than remote testing sessions.

The table below shows the low response rate from testers in all rounds of the UAT.

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Cycle 4
Response	6.2%	25%	13%	17%

The implementation team made several observations regarding the low test completion rates, including the PED's low prioritisation of the SA-SAMS project. The expectation of testing was not in line with the target officials’ jobs, which have nothing to do with school

operations (but involve data collection and submission), and there was a significant disconnect between the project, the DBE, PEDs and schools.

Noting these repeated disappointing outputs and the pressure to move the project forward swiftly, the team proposed numerous actions:

- Moving the responsibility for the SA-SAMS system from the EMIS teams to district and circuit management who are directly concerned with school operations (thus cutting out one implementation layer);
- Increasing the level of contact via meetings, group messaging and onsite support;
- Strengthening the reporting mechanisms by introducing committees at the district level to champion and coordinate the testing initiative;
- Conducting workshops for district leadership focusing on the new system's benefits, change management techniques and strategies for overcoming resistance;
- Allocating specific time during meetings to discuss the progress of the SA-SAMS implementation, review reports, address any obstacles and develop incentive programmes;
- Securing commitment via pledges and public statements; and
- Improving communication via a variety of platforms.

These clusters of actions proposed by the project team can be further aggregated into two themes: improved implementation targeting and change management tactics.

Synthesis: Some Take Aways

Below are some insights from the case studies as well as some practical proposals for strengthening policy and programme mediation.

Absence of upfront planning. Both case studies point to poor upfront planning of policy and programme mediation. In the case of the National Reading Strategy, there was no dedicated mediation plan, and similarly, the SA-SAMS UAT process did not develop and implement a detailed mediation plan that took into account the mediation dynamics across the several levels of the system. The implementation plan was only developed on the basis of failures stumbled upon as the various phases were implemented.

Insufficient allowance for penetration. In both case studies, insufficient consideration was given to penetration of preparation for the programme or the programme mediation process. In the case of the reading strategy, the provincial roadshows did not provide enough time to tackle complex implementation issues or to engage participants sufficiently to win them over. The large sizes of the workshops, with up to a 1 000 attendees, would have inhibited any form of buy-in, which is a critical part of mediation preparation. On the other hand, the success of the physical engagement in Limpopo during cycle 4 of the UAT demonstrates how important it is to ensure human interaction as well as sufficient time and material resources for the mediation. Light-touch advocacy leads to a fizzle out of the effects down the policy and programme mediation chain.

Absence of public approval weakens the status of the policies and programmes. The team responsible for the reading programme highlighted that the lack of approval by the HEDCOM and the CEM could have created the perception that the literacy strategy was of low importance. Similarly, the SA-SAMS team pointed out that the low response rate could have been the result of the EMIS team not attaching any significance to the UAT. The SA-SAMS team acknowledged that this attitude was largely a result of incongruence between the expectations of the UAT process and the daily jobs of the EMIS staff.

Awareness about policy and programmes determine implementation. This point is clearly demonstrated in the case of the National Reading Strategy, where the level of awareness of the strategy in the Northern Cape was considerably lower than in the rest of the provinces, which in turn appears to have resulted in considerably lower levels of implementation of the strategy in Northern Cape schools. From the two case studies, we can observe not only a range of avoidable blockages to policy mediation, but indications that much of the intended policy and programme effects do not reach the target levels - schools and classrooms in particular. Poor upfront planning of the rollout, mistiming of the implementation (during school holidays), wrongly targeted implementers, misalignment between the expectations of the implementation and the job

descriptions of the implementers, poor advocacy, and weak monitoring and reporting appear to have worked against policy and programme mediation in the two case studies.

A Proposed Solution: Framework and Tool for Practitioners

Following the premise established in the paper thus far, it is maintained that the phenomenon of policy (and programme) implementation incongruence is widespread and has far reaching effects on the delivery of education services. The paper also spotlighted the multidimensionality of blockages to policy mediation. Given these factors, this section of the paper presents an operational framework and a tool for improving the effects of policies and programmes on the intended targets: schools, teachers and learners.

The operational framework and tool were conceived with the understanding that more officials at the levels of directorial and operational governance should be more actively and systematically involved in the planning of policy implementation. Equally important, the constitutive governance level, which takes the lead in policy and programme design, should pay more attention to the implementation environment and be deliberate about creating an enabling environment for policy implementation. Figure 1 sketches out the conceptual framework.

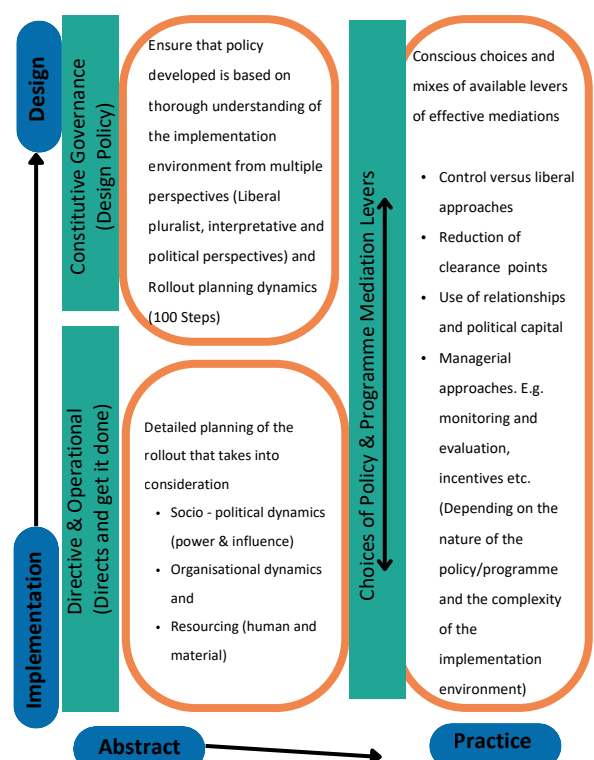


Figure 1: Conceptual model for improving policy mediation

The conceptual model is made up of three components organised across two dimensions, 'the design-implementation dimension' and the 'abstract-practice' dimension. Two of the components that are on the abstract-practice dimension have to do with the design of the policies and the execution of the implementation. The framework emphasises the need for a strong alignment between the design and the implementation components, where the constitutive governance level pays greater attention to the implementation environment, capacity requirements, approvals, awareness of goals, clarity and resource provisioning. The third component is in the practice space, which requires both the designers and the implementers to make specific choices regarding 'mediation levers'. Here, two insights are being sponsored:

1) both policy design and implementation should only be embarked upon following a choice of mediation levers; 2) the choice of the mediation levers should be made following thorough consideration of the nature of the policy or programme in question and the implementation dynamics. It follows that the mediation of any two policies or programmes should not necessarily use the same mediation strategy.

This conceptual framework is translated into an assessment instrument, (shown at the end of this document), which can be used by both policy designers and implementers to establish if they have comprehensively considered the full range of mediation dynamics in order to increase the chances of achieving the policy and programme intentions. The lists of items covered in each category are not exhaustive but merely present a demonstration of how discipline can be maintained in the design and implementation of policies and programmes.

Notes on the application of the instrument:

- Each of the items is scored out of 10 and the scores are summed up to give a total.
- The sum totals for the first two categories (in the abstract dimension) are meant to represent an index of satisfaction with the design and the implementation processes.
- The practice side of the instrument should be

applied and interpreted differently. The scoring, which is also out of 10, involves weighting the different levers of mediation. It is suggested that the weightings should collectively be out of 100 so as to force the mediation designers to allocate different weightings to different levers.

- Care should be taken to

1. Ensure that the levers chosen are not only practicable but are coherent and complementary.
2. Avoid unintended effects of a specific measure or set of measures. For example, weak prescription will lead to uncontrollable errors or complete failure of implementation, especially where the implementers do not have the requisite skills and resources. Equally, too much prescription may rob the policy or programme process of 'implementation adaptability', and too much focus on measurement may lead to pure pursuance of nominal activities by the implementers – 'malicious compliance'.

A systematic attempt to apply this instrument will enable mediation designers and implementers, individually and in teams, to avoid several ambiguities that bedevil many public policies and programmes: mission comprehension ambiguity, directive goal ambiguity, evaluative goal ambiguity, and priority ambiguity.

Conclusion

The paper used policy implementation literature to explore policy and programme mediation dynamics in two case studies. The paper confirms its starting hypothesis that the mediation of education policies and programmes need a rethink. The rethink will reduce poor national policy and programme effects, which are a result of 'implementation incongruence' over and above poor policy and programme design. The insights from the explorations were used to make proposals on how to improve policy mediation. The proposed conceptual and operational frameworks create a basis for increased discipline in the policy design process and in decision-making on whether specific sets of policies are ready to be implemented. The frameworks will also assist to address a range of implementation design ambiguities that beset education policy and programmatic agendas.

ASSESSMENT AT POLICY - MAKING

LEVEL

Criteria	Out of 10
1. Thorough assessment of policy implementation	
2. Assessment of implementation capacity	
3. Political and administrative approvals	
4. Thorough assessment of policy implementation	
Total	

IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL (ENVIRONMENT & CAPACITY)

1. Social dynamics complexity	
2. Implementation dynamics	
3. Ideological and structural complexities	
4. Enabling environment created	
5. Implementers' understanding of policy/programme	
6. Existence of requisite technical skills	
7. Positivity attitudes towards policy/programme	
Total	

CHOICES OF MEDIATION LEVERS FOR POLICY OR PROGRAMME

Criteria	Out of 10
1. Centralisation of Implementation (control)	
2. Use of prescription for decentralised implementation	
3. Reduction of clearance points/ requirements	
4. Use of policy implementation networks/ relationships and political capital	
5. Managerial approach (detailed planning of the implementation and control)	
6. Monitoring and Feedback (evidence and accountability)	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
11.	
12.	
Total	

End Notes

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The central interest of the paper is to identify practical ways in which education officials across both the development and the implementation divide and non-state change agents can support policy and programme mediation.

Unlocking Policy Potential

The gap between policy intentions and outcomes, dubbed ‘implementation incongruence’ by Wildavsky in 1973, remains a major concern in education and other areas of public service. Dr Godwin Khosa of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) presents a compelling examination of the persistent issues of implementation incongruence. This paper delves into the intricate process of policy mediation, where achieving intended policy effects demands more than straightforward implementation. Through the lens of two case studies involving the NECT and the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the paper illustrates the challenges of maintaining policy integrity from conception to execution.

The case studies demonstrate how programme intentions are diluted by the time they reach the intended points of effect,

“ Programme intentions are diluted by the time they reach the intended points of effect, in the same way an electricity line loses voltage over a distance”

in the same way that an electricity line loses voltage over a distance.

Questions are posed about the practice of bureaucracy, which is rooted in hierarchy and red tape and is highly susceptible to complex human behavioral dynamics, and its effects on realising policy intentions.

Lessons from the field: The case of the National Reading Strategy and South African Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) Project

In this comprehensive analysis, Dr Khosa delves into case studies that highlight both successes and failures in policy mediation



Lack of Upfront Planning: Both studies highlight poor upfront planning in policy and programme mediation. For instance, the National Reading Strategy and SA-SAMS User Acceptance Testing (UAT) Process, lacked dedicated mediation plans, leading to reactive rather than proactive implementation



Insufficient Penetration: Both case studies reveal inadequate consideration of the preparation and mediation processes. For example, the large-scale provincial roadshows for the reading strategy failed to engage participants effectively, while the successful engagement in Limpopo demonstrated the importance of sufficient interaction and resources



Absence of Public Approval: The lack of public endorsement weakened the perceived importance of policies and programmes. The reading programme's effectiveness was undermined by insufficient approval from key committees, and similar issues affected the SA-SAMS UAT process.



Awareness and Implementation: Awareness levels significantly impacted the implementation of policies. The National Reading Strategy faced lower implementation levels in the Northern Cape due to reduced awareness compared to other provinces.

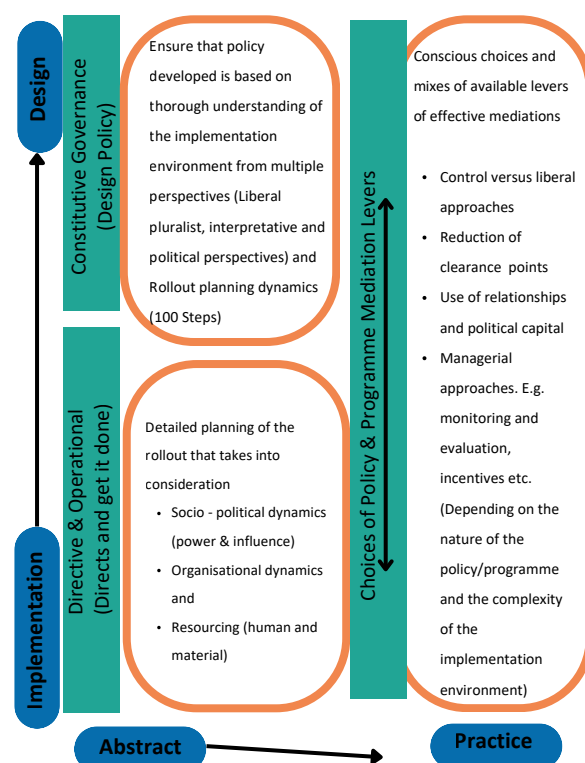
General Observations: Common blockages to effective policy mediation include poor planning, mistimed implementation, misaligned expectations, inadequate advocacy, and weak monitoring. These factors contributed to the failure of intended policy and programme effects reaching target levels, particularly schools and classrooms.

A Proposed Solution: Framework and Tool for Practitioners

Following the premise established in the paper, it is maintained that the phenomenon of policy (and programme) implementation incongruence is widespread and has far reaching effects on the delivery of education services. This section of the paper presents an operational framework and a tool for improving the effects of policies and programmes on the intended targets: schools, teachers and learners

- The conceptual model is made up of three components organised across two dimensions, 'the design implementation dimension' and the 'abstract-practice' dimension.
- Two of the components that are on the abstract-practice dimension have to do with the design of the policies and the execution of the implementation. The framework emphasises the need for a strong alignment between the design and the implementation components, where the constitutive governance levels pays greater attention to the implementation environment, capacity requirements, approvals, awareness goals, clarity and resource provisioning.
- The third component is in the practice space, which requires both the designers and the implementers to make specific choices regarding 'mediation levers'.

The framework is further developed into an assessment tool for policy designers and implementers to evaluate if they have fully considered mediation dynamics to enhance the likelihood of achieving policy goals.



A systemic attempt to apply this instrument will enable mediation designers and implementers, individually and in teams, to avoid several ambiguities that bedevil many public policies and programmes: mission comprehension ambiguity, directive goal ambiguity, evaluative goal ambiguity, and priority ambiguity.

Conclusion

The paper used policy implementation literature to explore policy and programme mediation dynamics in two case studies. The paper confirms its starting hypothesis that the mediation of education policies and programmes need a rethink. The rethink will reduce poor national policy and programme effects, which are a result of 'implementation incongruence' over and above poor policy and programme design. The insights from the explorations were used to make proposals on how to improve policy mediation. The proposed conceptual and operational frameworks create a basis for increased discipline in the policy design process and in decision-making whether specific sets of policies are ready to be implemented. The frameworks will also assist to address a range of implementation design ambiguities.



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