

**An Introduction to Policy**  
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The document serves as an introduction to policy studies, especially as applied to education. It begins with a definition—or rather a conceptualization—of policy. Because policy can be understood in many ways, it is essential for individuals who are discussing policy to apply a definition to their own work. The second provides a very brief overview of different types of policy research.

**Conceptualizing Policy**

Policy is more than a “general principle or plan that guides the actions taken by a person or group” (*The American heritage dictionary*, 1983). It is also more than the text of a law or rule. Policies do not have fixed meanings, nor are they completely absent of power. Instead, I understand policies as possessing a dual construction. While they have an authority that is quite real, the understandings and beliefs of the individuals who act on those policies limit that authority.

In their discussion of the definition of public policy, Hill and Hupe (2002) note the difference between policy and *the* policy. The latter refers to a specific set of rules that serve to guide decisions and solve a social problem. The former is more general, including both *the* policy as well as the implementation of that policy, which has the effect of further defining policy. Hill and Hupe also refer to the policy cycle, by which policy is created, implemented, evaluated, and re-created.

Ball (1994) distinguishes between two aspects of policy. First, policy is a text that any number of actors must interpret. Furthermore, those actors *act on* the policy. How those actors interpret and act on the policy defines it, and as the actors change, so will the policy. Second, policy is a discourse that exercises power by producing truth and knowledge. Policy defines the very targets and instruments of the policy. No Child Left Behind, for instance, constructs schools, teachers, students, and learning in a way that both defines and limits how individuals can think about education.

Policy is inherently political. Ball (1994) notes that “the texts are the product of compromises at various stages (at points of initial influence, in the micropolitics of legislative formation, in the parliamentary process and in the micropolitics of interest group articulation)” (p. 16). Stone (2002) suggests that while they clearly have policy goals, policymakers are often as concerned with the political goal of preserving or gaining power to accomplish their policy goals.

I understand policy simultaneously as text and discourse. The text is a product of political negotiation and political motivation. The text is a manifestation of societies’ beliefs about a social problem. At the same time, the policy constructs a way of thinking about the problem. As it becomes a part of the implementers’ belief systems, it sets limitations (and possibilities) on their actions. As a discourse, the policy is constantly redefined as various individuals act on the policy, changing the context in which interpretation and implementation occur. The political nature of policy creation and implementation is especially important as a factor mediating the influence of policy on school professionals. In this sense, the policy itself does not act; rather, the actors who implement policy create the policies’ outcomes.

In addition to more formal types of policy, such as federal and state laws, official administrative guidelines, and even teachers’ classroom rules, there are different types of less formal policies. They are the often unwritten and unspoken rules that guide us every day. Jones (2009) has referred to them as “soft policies.” As a part of the professional discourse, they establish norms of behavior.

### **Types of Policy Research**

I think of policy research in two categories: research *on* policy and research *for* policy. Sometimes, the two types of research may inform one another, creating a policy cycle. Other times, studies stand alone. Here, I discuss various types of policy research and how they might be applied to one policy—The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

The first category—research *on* policy—is comprised primarily of policy implementation research and policy evaluation. Policy evaluation is the stricter approach. *Evaluation* refers to the process of measuring outcomes and comparing them to a standard. Policy evaluation, then, refers to measuring the outcomes of a policy and comparing them to the policy’s objectives. For instance, the objective of NCLB is to improve academic achievement (as measured by standardized test scores) and to close the gap in performance between various populations of students. An evaluation of NCLB might measure current achievement levels and compare them to previous levels. If scores are improving, and the gap is shrinking, then the policy is successful to some degree. Policy implementation research often provides a broader picture than policy evaluation. Researchers using this approach focus on what happens when policy is implemented. Much current research is of this type. Quantitative, studies might examine changes to instructional time, staffing, or course offerings since the implementation of NCLB (Heffner, 2007). Qualitative approaches may study perceptions of policy or the actual implementation process (Kos, 2007).

The predominant type of research in the second category—research *for* policy—is policy analysis. Dunn (1981) defines policy analysis as “an applied social science discipline which uses multiple methods of inquiry and argument to produce and transform policy-relevant information that may be utilized in political settings to resolve policy problems” (p. 35) Nagel (2002) describes it as “determining which of various alternative policies will most achieve a given set of goals in light of the relations between the policies and the goals” (p. 133). Policy analysis is a useful approach for scholars who want to influence what is happening in schools because a variety of social, economic, and political objectives can be achieved through policy (Morse and Struyk, 2006). McDonnell (2009) has argued that education policy research needs to be more “policy analytic;” that is, it needs to focus more on recommending solutions to problems rather than identifying or describing problems. There is a variety of approaches to policy analysis. One popular model is Bardach’s (2000) Eightfold Path. He recommends 1) identifying a problem, 2)

gathering some evidence, 3) identifying alternatives, 4) establishing criteria, 5) projecting outcomes, 6) confronting tradeoffs, 7) making a decision, and 8) telling the story. In this case, NCLB was the product of policy analysis, the solution to a problem—presumably the achievement gap and the overall low rate of reading and mathematics proficiency.

These descriptions and categorizations are, obviously, overly simplistic. Studies do not always fit neatly into one category or the other. There are undoubtedly other types of policy research, and others may think of them differently. The details of each approach are beyond the scope of this introduction. Still, it is useful and important to recognize the types of studies that are being done and what is possible in policy research.