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CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN CAMEROON HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Policies are living documents that require various inputs to assist in fulfilling their goals, and as such attention to policy issues does not end at the creation of the policy. Its implementation is increasingly a multi-sectored endeavour and a successful policy process requires democratic public participation, wherein the national sphere, different stakeholders get involved in order to reduce the political pressure on the government and thus achieve its objectives. Yet, this engagement might not continue during the policy implementation stage. Thus, it is crucial to consider the dimensions of stakeholder engagement in policy implementation. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the dimensions of stakeholders' engagement in policy implementation and the factors associated with implementation failure due to this gap. Some practical strategies are suggested to overcome implementation performance (way forward) and conclude with the proposition that implementation failure is partly due to a lack of stakeholders' engagement.

KEYWORDS

Policy, Policy Implementation, stakeholder, stakeholders' engagement.



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INTRODUCTION

As policy implementation seems to be ineffective in Cameroon Higher Education Institutions, societal confidence in government's ability to achieve the objectives of higher institution becomes futile. Concerns about its implementation stage continually assume a greater significance. Policy makers are very particular about formulating very lofty policies and pay little or no attention to its implementation phase, in spite of the complexities associated with execution. Implementation often turns out to be the cemetery of Higher Educational policies. However, the government of Cameroon acknowledges the value of engaging key stakeholders in the development of Higher Education institutions to create sound, transparent and trusted educational policies. This is evident in the law of 16 April 2001 guiding the orientation of higher education in Cameroon, also is Cameroon's Growth and Employment Strategy Paper 2021-2020. It should be noted that the 2001 law of orientation places significant importance on collaboration with socio-economic partners, while according to GESPE, the professionalization of higher education will be more refined and efficient partnership with all stakeholders in education and training will be forged. This paper therefore, focuses on industry/employers as a predominant stakeholder and illustrates the value of engaging them in policy implementation from a theoretical perspective.

As posit by Bhuyan et al (2010) seven dimensions influence policy implementation, inter-alia: policy formation and dissemination; social political and economic context; leadership for policy implementation; stakeholder involvement in policy implementation; Implementation planning and resource mobilisation; operations/services and feedback on progress and results. From the above, it is very evident that stakeholders' engagement is a crucial element for a successful policy implementation. This suggest that mere formulation of policies should become not the major issues or concerns in Cameroon Higher Education Institutions but rather their effective implementation, as it is only effectively implemented policies that can bring about improvement and growth.

In articulating this, policy makers and stakeholders should continually engage in meaningful dialogue, examining the consequences for fundamental values, sharing burdens, strengths and weaknesses for a successful policy implementation.

In the words of, George Honadle and Rudi Klaus, (cited from Egonmwan, 2009) *'implementation is the nemesis of designers, it conjures up images of plans gone awry and of social carpenters and masons who fail to build to specifications and thereby distort the beautiful blue prints for progress which were handed to them. It provokes memories of good ideas that did not work and places the blame on the second member of the administration team'*

This is reflective of the implementation phase of policies in Higher Education Institutions Cameroon where those who formulate policies place more emphasis on the powerful forces of politics with large amount of energy and resources spent for a successful implementation which usually result in shortcomings, difficulties and failures. Stakeholders who are major entities in Higher Education are completely left out or relegated to the background resulting to a negative implication on the achievement of institutional goals.

CONCEPTUALISING STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

It is very vital to examine key terms since words have a plethora of meaning. It is also hoped that this is critical in facilitating a better understanding of the focus of this work,

Public policy

Policy-making is a techno-political process of articulating and matching actor goals and means. Many organizations and actors create policies but "public" policies are made by governments; decisions to act or not to act, to change, or maintain, some aspect of the status quo (Birkland, 2001). Public policy is as an output of the political system, this output itself is conceived as the result of various environmental variable acted upon by the political system. The political system here consists of the institutions, processes and personnel of government and acts as the processor of input into output, which are authoritative allocations of values. The authoritative allocations of output are the public policies. Public policies are therefore the reaction of the political system to environmental demands and pressures. Demands are the articulated needs, problems and aspirations which are brought to bear upon the political system.

A plethora of conceptual definitions of policy exist and it wouldn't be scholarly trying to glue to the one best definition that suits. Henri (2006) traced back public policy to 4000 years to the Babylon city or Ur and defined it as 'a course of action adopted and pursued by government towards accomplishment of objectives.' While Jenkins (1978) defines public policy as 'a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should, in principle, be within the power of those actors to achieve'.

Viewing policy in the perspective of Jerkins, as the pursuit of conscious goals nevertheless, raises the significance to policy-making of the ideas and knowledge held by policy actors about policy goals and the tools or techniques used to achieve them; this of course shapes understanding of policy problems and the appropriateness of potential solutions to them. Taking into consideration jerkin's definition above, it is out rightly clear that policy implementation is an integral part of policy formulation. However, many researchers consider policy implementation as a separate activity which takes place after policy has been formulated. This view however can be supported on the basis that there is little appreciation of the fact that building support for policies is an integral part of designing them. On the other hand, Pressman and Wilsdavsky (1973) argue that separating policy formulation from its implementation phase is very fatal and detrimental in the realisation and the effectiveness of the policy.

Policy Implementation

Policy implementation involves translating the goals and objectives of a policy into concrete action and reality. When all the laws required to give effect to policies adopted have been put in place, logically the next phase is the actual implementation of the policy. In order words, policy implementation refers to the application of the policy by the government's administrative machinery to the problem. It should be noted that while administrative agencies are the primary implementers of public policies other actors that are supposed to be involved are stakeholders. Traditionally, policy

makers see education policy implementation as a technical stage of the policy process in which the decision they have taken gets executed by the administration and educators throughout the system.

According to Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), implementation is the process of carrying out, accomplishing, fulfilling, producing and completing a policy. Kraft and Furlong (2007) state that policy implementation actually refers to the process and activities involved in the application, effectuation and administration of a policy. To corroborate, Nweke (2006) list out a series of activities involved in the implementation of a policy which includes; issuing and enforcing directives, disbursing funds, signing contracts, collecting data and analysing problem, hiring and assigning personnel, setting up committees and commissions, assigning duties and responsibilities and also making interim decisions. Simply put, policy implementations are those activities that are directed towards putting programmes to the necessary personnel, logistic support and funds, which will enhance the actualization of the policy objectives.

Initially, the emphasis in the literature of policy studies was more on the policy formulation stage. In contemporary times however, emphasis has shifted to policy implementation following the realization that effective implementation of policies is not an automatic affair (Egonmwan 1984). In addition, policy implementation has become of greater concern to its formulation particularly in developing countries like Cameroon where the government is increasingly looked by its citizen to effectively implement development projects and programmes but contrarily the ineffective implementation of policies has become very critical and worrisome.

The pattern and nature of policy implementation, account for the success or failure of any given policy. In this light, Nwankwo and Apeh (2008), observe that policy implementation is the most vital phase in the policy process as it determines the success or failure of a policy. To corroborate, Dick (2003), argues that policy implementation is the most crucial dimension in the policy process given the fact that the success or failure of any given policy is to a high degree a function of implementation. In essence it can be said that policy implementation is the hub of a policy.

The Perspective of Stakeholder in Higher Educational Institutions

Broadly defined, a stakeholder is a person, group, or organization involved in or affected by a course of action. Higher education institutions, whose primary goal of existence is to generate and disseminate knowledge, cannot achieve its objectives without the inputs of stakeholders given the fact that the school functions as an open system. Stakeholders are a contributing factor in the teaching and learning process and therefore are an important constituent as they are affected by the outcome of university activities and vice versa. They provide the input and provide feedback to the universities.

Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives". On their part, Thomson, Wartick and Smith (1991), define stakeholders as groups "in relationship with an organisation." While Clarkson (1995) sees stakeholders as "persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future".

In the same light, Hill and Jones (1992) define stakeholders as “constituents who have a legitimate claim on the firm”, while Carroll (1993) states that by virtue of legitimacy; groups or individuals can be considered as stakeholders, of which the legitimacy could include power. Higher education stakeholders relate to different users of higher education: students, graduates, employers and society who want to have their say in deciding what quality in higher education is. In stakeholder and policy implementation, it is critical to identify appropriate stakeholders and understand their influence on the policy process, their motivators given the proposed policy change, and strategies for engaging the stakeholders in the policy process.

Theoretical perspectives

While there is wide agreement about the need for sustainable stakeholder engagement, some theoretical foundations guide its usage and design. Within an environment of complexity, and evolving landscape of higher education as knowledge-based economy some key questions need to be examined with an understanding of theoretical knowledge evident in Cameroon educational policy implementation paradigm. What is the importance of stakeholders' engagement? What are some barriers or weaknesses in stakeholders' engagement in Cameroon? What are some best practices or workable models that Cameroon can learn from? What will happen if stakeholders fully participate in educational policy implementation.

The open system theory was propagated by Karz and Kahn in 1978. Before this theory came into existence, all the theories regarding organizational behaviour considered organizations as closed entity, cut off from the world. For example, the Human Relations perspective of Elton Mayo and the Administrative theories of Henri Fayol treated the organization largely as a self-contained entity. It should be noted that many environmental factors do play a significant role in shaping the way organizations work and hence came in the open systems theory. Any time an individual organization uses resources from its environment including personnel in its production; its system is open to outside forces. As a logical consequence, Schools are open systems as they interact with their external environment for the attainment of the organisational goals. The theory posits that, Open systems contain five basic elements: inputs, transformation process, outputs, feedback, and the environment.

The Open System Model takes into account relations between systems and its environment. Its properties look at the overall picture; the communication and feedback are essential to clearly direct planning and create an intelligent design. That is to say the theory captures and supports the premise that stakeholders must get engaged in policy implementation. As a consequence, the theory suggests as way forward that the school must get involve its environment in its processes and activities. By so doing, the environment (industry) can directly and indirectly affect performance and outcomes through their engagement. This implies university administrators should engage in continuous feedback and an open-door policy with the environment especially the employers to strengthen the interactive dynamics between them. That opens the door for better communication and more feedback. When the system and subsystems experience adequate collaboration, enough feedback, the results can produce more clearly directed planning, intelligent design, useful products and necessary services. The open system sees the employer as a very vital stakeholder who comes into the system with their own interest and perceptions of how best to satisfy them. Based on this premise, the social, political, and economic contexts in which school administrators work are marked by pressures at the local, levels. Thus, they should find it necessary to manage and develop internal operations while

concurrently monitoring the environment in anticipating and responding to external demands. This can only be realized through mutual cooperation with employers by getting them involved in policy implementation and in all stages of the teaching learning process. If universities operate based on systems thinking, they will work with other partners within the society to determine inputs and processes in order to derive desired outcomes.

The Stakeholder theory (political frame) was propagated by Lee Bolman and Terry Deal (1991). The political frame emerged from the works of political scientist who sees educational organisations as synonymous to jungles. This is so because the school as an organisation is viewed as a tool and arena where various groups (stakeholders) struggle to gain their interests. They come to the education sector with conflicting perspectives and interest with background knowledge that the basic resources needed for the attainment of the educational goals are scarce. The political frame is based on the assumption that anybody within an educational organization can possess and wield power. Unlike the structural frame which is task-orientated and assumes that only persons occupying formal positions within a hierarchical structure have power to influence.

In view of this assumption, and taking into cognizance that stakeholders come in with vary interest and perspectives a scene is automatically set for a political activity. In this light, the political activities will entail negotiation, compromise, conflict of interest, power struggle bargaining and formation of coalitions. As a logical consequence, the groups with more power tend to have things in their favour and interest. To corroborate, Titanji (2013) affirms that the political frame conceptualizes an educational organization as a micro- political setting within which the diverse interest of the stakeholders has to be satisfied. That is to say that if the interest of employers is not satisfied, it could account for non-engagement. Therefore, the frame suggests that there should be absolute collaboration between higher education and industry so their interest of providing students with skills to enable them fit appropriately in the labour market could be taking into consideration.

The situation of stakeholders' engagement, in Higher Education Institutions Cameroon

Higher education is seen by many as providing a highly skilled human resource or human capital that drives the economy for sustainable growth and to the socio-economic betterment of individuals, and by so doing reduce social inequalities (Schomburg & Teichler, 2006). This can only be achieved in collaboration and synergy with the different stakeholders.

Concerns about stakeholder engagement in Cameroon are as old as schools themselves. An inter-ministerial circular No. 242/L/729/MINEDUC/JMS of 25th October 1979 created the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in schools. This was a to promote and strengthen cooperation with parents as an integral part of the school administration. In addition, the law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998 to lay down guidelines for education in Cameroon lays emphasis on educational community. To this effect the said law in section 32 stipulates that;

-The educational community shall comprise all individuals and corporate bodies that contribute towards the functioning, development and prestige of a school. It shall comprise of the following members; the authorities, administrative and support staff, teachers, parents, pupils, students, persons from socio-professional circles, regional and local authorities.

In the same light, Law No. 005 of 16th April 2001 define the orientation of Higher Education in terms of teaching, research and cooperation. One of the objectives of the above law is to define in collaboration with socio- economic partners, the responsibilities of public and private university

institutions. Article 2 of the law clearly stipulates that in attaining the quest of excellence in all domains of knowledge; emphasis should be on Social promotion, with the participation of competent national bodies and socio- professional circles, especially as concerns the drawing up of programmes, policies, as well as organization of theoretical courses, practical and internships.

In line with the above, on 20th December 2010, MINESUP and GICAM, an employer's association of Cameroon signed a partnership charter (the University-Industry Charter). The charter is an expression of the values that the partners wish to see through their mutual relationships in order to optimize and strengthen the organization and collaboration between the industry and the university, in a climate of legal certainty and trust. For this purpose, it aims to amongst others; reinforces the dialogue and mutual beneficial exchanges between the university and the industry. To demonstrate this cooperation, the Ministry of Higher Education created an office in charge of Research, cooperation and relation with the business world in all eight state universities in Cameroon. This office is headed by a deputy vice chancellor under the auspices of the vice chancellor. As functions, the Cooperation Division has the responsibility of coordinating all university wide initiatives furthering national and international cooperation. In addition, the Office is expected to advise, monitor and assist individual Departments, Faculties and Schools and Colleges in their cooperation and outreach activities. In order that the Office can best perform these latter responsibilities, all units of the university are expected to keep the Office informed of new initiatives and progress being made on existing national and international relationships and projects. Also, all Establishments are expected to keep the Cooperation Office informed of the general nature of national and international partnerships being developed and activities implementing partnership agreements. Vice-Deans in charge of Research and Cooperation have been appointed in each Faculty/School/College to manage their respective cooperation and outreach activities in collaboration with the Cooperation Division, under the supervisory authority of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor/RCB and the Vice-Chancellor.

More specifically, in pursuit of its vision, the University of Buea has developed a Cooperation Policy on national and international cooperation. The University of Buea has equally established several National and International Partnerships. Partnership agreements or Memoranda of Understanding are signed with national and international academic institutions, the private and public sectors, business enterprises and industry, NGO's and Civil Society organizations to enrich programmes of study within the framework of the vision in terms of links with the business world. This is instrumental in maintaining national and international standards and the recognition of the university in the global economy of knowledge with its graduates having a cutting edge into the global workforce. To ensure that partnerships are beneficial and also sustainable, a Check List containing terms and conditions of establishing MOU's/Partnership Agreements or Contracts have been developed as a guide. However, despite these frantic efforts by the government, there are still huge setbacks causing barriers for stakeholders' engagement in policy implementation.

Barriers to Stakeholders' engagement in Policy Implementation

Implementation barriers are often the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about implementation. Taking steps to avoid or overcome these barriers at an early stage of implementation is crucial. It is possible that criticisms of the shortcomings of policy implementation are not so much the result of failure in the infeasibility of the policy rather of failure in the implementation process.

These include amongst others: school leadership; enduring differences of the stakeholders and resistance to Change.

School Leadership; the term leadership has been defined by Coleman and Glover (2010) as the action of leading a group of people or an organization. As posit by Thomson (1992) there are a number of activities that school leaders must perform to ensure effective running of a school. According to him school leaders must understand changes as well as manage them, they must involve and motivate staff, create a positive culture, build group vision, provide a positive instructional environment, stimulate public support, and engage community leaders. Without this the implementation phase cannot be achieved.

As posit by Bryson & Crosby (2005), Leadership is essential for effective policy implementation. High-level actors and influential leaders can communicate about the policy's rationale and mechanisms, and champion the policy to ensure implementation, which requires co-ordination and co-operation (Bhuyan 2005). The level of consensus among leaders and other policy stakeholders on the content of a policy and its need for implementation will affect the degree and timing of its implementation (Thomas & Grindle 1990). However, some leaders do not have the ability to cooperate with stakeholders in the way they exhibit their leadership styles. They encourage a climate characterised by paranoid, unhealthy coalition and power struggle which hampers effective cooperation for implementation.

Enduring differences of the Stakeholders;

Stakeholders may have vested interests that are not aligned with the intervention. Differences manifest amongst stakeholders in dimensions such as interest, as posit by the political frame of Bolman and Deal (2013). Stakeholders come to the school arena with various interests. Within an environment of scarce resources, the procession of power becomes a critical resource. If the interests of the various stakeholders are not homogenous, then the scene is set for political activity giving rise to conflict and non-consensus in the implementation of policies. Those with religious background may be more interested in education for character development, politicians will be interested in education for integrations while employers, the education that serve economic interest of the country. Due to these differences, the participation and engagement in policy implementation of these different stakeholders is fluid. Implying the various stakeholders are not permanently interested in all issues and so some may result in nonparticipation. This is a very crucial factor in the implementation phase because participatory processes are seen as a remedy for what hampers the implementation process of policies.

Resistance to Change;

Stakeholders, in particular those responsible for delivering an intervention, may sometimes resist change and this can undermine implementation. Some common reasons for resistance to change include the following:

- Stakeholders feel they have not been consulted
- Changes are implemented before stakeholders are ready
- Implementation is perceived as occurring through coercion or control from leadership
- Organisational culture is not aligned with the intervention

- Appropriate governance structures to support implementation are not in place.

Importance of Stakeholders' engagement in Policy Implementation

Higher Education stakeholders are individuals or groups of persons who have vested interest in the welfare and success of the educational system, the university and students. These include; Educational leaders and administrators, teachers, students, parents, families, local community members, school board members, councils, state officials, politicians, business organizations, religious organizations, alumni groups, education advocacy groups, media outlets and cultural organizations. All these entities in other words have a "stake" in education and this usually can be personal, professional, civic, or financial interest or concern.

Stakeholder engagement refers to the process by which an organization involves people who may be affected by the decisions it makes or who can influence the implementation of decisions. In other words, any group or individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives. Stakeholders may support or oppose decisions and may be influential in the organization or within the community in which they operate. They are crucial entities that play a role in organization's performance or operations or those affected by the actions undertaken by the organization (Horev & Babad, 2005). External stakeholder support is critical in influencing opinion or perception of the change in the community and the society at large. While internal stakeholders play a major role in facilitating its successful implementation by providing their skills and knowledge and providing appropriate leadership in the organization to allow for the proposed change (Griffiths, Maggs & George, 2007).

There are several reasons to consider engaging key stakeholders in policy implementation. On a practical level;

- Stakeholders are the recipient of policy and as a logical consequence their engagement is imperative
- The improvements in the lives of Stakeholders determine success or failure of public policy.
- Stakeholders can utilize many ways to influence policy. They could Lobby, Call for conferences Support or advocate for non-support of a policy as well as rally
- Stakeholder engagement identifies areas of agreement as well as disagreement and provides an opportunity to understand more fully what might be driving key stakeholder differences.
- They help articulate/reflect values of the broader community that is affected
- They align practice recommendations with societal needs and expectations
- They help execute the implementation of guidelines as intended
- Their engagement promotes transparency
- Their engagement increases the quality and trustworthiness of the policy

Way forward to Stakeholders' engagement in policy implementation (best practices)

Ensuring implementation implies all hands-on deck for meaningful implementation to take place towards the realisation of an effective policy. Below are some practices which can be termed best for a successful policy implementation.

The ability to reckon with the external environment;

The world beyond the physical boundaries of the educational organisation is termed the external environment from which the school receives inputs which are later transformed into outputs and sends back as graduates into the larger society to serve. It is a continuous process as the environment sends feed back to the school on the quality of its outputs. This information enables the school to evaluate its activities for improvement. As a consequence, the external environment provides legitimacy and support in various forms to the school whose outputs meet its needs for sustainable development. It should be noted that the external environment does not comprise only of human beings but also non-human forces such as economic, technological, cultural and political developments which mounts pressure on schools. This is inevitable because schools are considered as open systems and do not function in isolation. These forces are continually exerting pressure on the education sector especially when policies are being made. This implies that what occurs in schools is a reflection of the external environment. Schools effect their environment and are in turn affected by them.

Schools should be viewed as a political arena;

The Political Frame of Bolman and Deal (2013), addresses the problem of individuals and interest groups (stakeholder) having sometimes conflicting (often hidden) agendas, especially at times when budgets are limited and the organization has to make difficult choices. In this Frame one will see coalition-building, conflict resolution work, and power-base building to support the leader's initiatives. This frame addresses the issue of lack of cooperation, because administrators do not understand that the school is a political arena and tool for stakeholders whose interest has to be satisfied, they constantly alienate from them which is very detrimental to engaging them in policy implementation. The political frame suggests that the school as an organization is an active political agent in larger arenas, which can be termed ecosystems. Since organisations depend on their environments for resources they need to survive, they are inevitably tangled with external constituents or stakeholders whose expectations or demand must be heeded. This must be done with the understanding that these stakeholders (employers) speak with loud but conflicting voices.

Suggesting a way forward, administrators should see themselves as political actors and therefore need to master many basic skills of individual managers as politicians, develop an agenda, map the environment, manage relationships with allies negotiate accords and alliances. Above all they need to learn how to cope with power and conflict, build coalitions, master political skills, and deal with internal and external politics all in a bid to create a conducive environment for synergy. In this case, universities must build coalition with stakeholders and work very closely at every stage of the teaching learning process; most especially getting them engaged in policy implementation. In so doing, interests must have been satisfied and objectives met.

Provide training to community stakeholders in helping them develop effective communications and awareness.

The sharing of information, communication and education should focus on enhancing common understanding of the concepts of participation and "participation rights". The full participation should reach the highest level of sharing the right to make decision. Furthermore, the concept of active citizenship should be continuously promoted in association with the concept of education quality. This help raise the community's awareness of and readiness in sharing the responsibilities of

education governance and the government. Together they promote an education whose final outcome is the creation of citizens with adequate health, intellectual capacity, good ethics, lifelong learning ability and the capacity to engage in the governance of society. With this notion, stakeholders will deem it necessary to get engaged in all the activities of educational institutions and more importantly in the implementation of its policies. Simply put the current participation of stakeholders' issues at schools and community will give them the capacity to get involved in broader social governance. Above all Communicate clearly about the policy (use shared vision, adapt the level of speech). This engagement is a key to addressing the issue of stakeholders' engagement in policy implementation.

Engage stakeholders in the formulation of educational policies before implementation;

Stakeholders are not adequately educated on government initiatives which makes it difficult for them to implement these policies very well in their areas of operation. therefore, as a way forward government should always engage critical stakeholders in its formulation to ensure effective implementation of government initiatives. If policies are being formulated, these stakeholders should be invited to actually understand these policies.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, Stakeholder engagement is considered vital to the success and improvement of a school. The involvement of the broader community of the school with it can improve communication and public understanding and allows for the incorporation of the perspectives, experiences and expertise of participating community members to improve reform proposals, strategies, or processes. Whether and how stakeholders are recognised and included in the implementation process is crucial to its effectiveness. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidences give us a clear picture of how stakeholders are left out in the implementation process of policies causing very negative impact towards the achievement of organizational goals. However, if policy makers and stakeholders want policies to be effective, and improve education, they need to share a common understanding of implementation to be able to work together in the process.

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