

**THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC POLICY AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY: DEBATES  
BEYOND LEGISLATION**

***O CONCEITO DE POLÍTICA PÚBLICA E POLÍTICA EDUCACIONAL: DEBATES  
ALÉM DA LEGISLAÇÃO***

***EL CONCEPTO DE POLÍTICA PÚBLICA Y POLÍTICA EDUCATIVA: DEBATES MÁS  
ALLÁ DE LA LEGISLACIÓN***



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**How to reference this paper:**

Ó, C. F.; SANTOS, C. V.; LORENZI, C. C. B. The concept of public policy and educational policy: Debates beyond legislation. **Revista on line de Política e Gestão Educacional**, Araraquara, v. 27, n. 00, e023071, 2023. e-ISSN: 1519-9029. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22633/rpge.v27i00.18141>



| **Submitted:** 09/06/2023  
| **Revisions required:** 20/10/2023  
| **Approved:** 16/11/2023  
| **Published:** 28/12/2023

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**Editor:** Prof. PhD. Sebastião de Souza Lemes  
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**ABSTRACT:** This article proposes to undertake a brief reflection on the implementation of public policies, drawing a parallel between how they are established as instruments for organizing the public structure and their repercussions that influence society and its organization. Frey (2000), Sarmiento (2012), Lascoumes and Galès (2012), and Mainardes, Ferreira, and Tello (2011) were used to substantiate the discussion. It is, therefore, a qualitative bibliographical study. Thus, the present study sought to highlight that public policy and educational policy are instruments of the State that should contribute to society, qualifying the practices of public bodies and making them more accessible.

**KEYWORDS:** Public policy. Educational policies. State.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo propõe realizar uma breve reflexão sobre a noção da implementação de políticas públicas, traçando um paralelo entre os meios pelos quais elas são estabelecidas como instrumento de organização da estrutura pública e seus desdobramentos que acabam influenciando a sociedade e sua organização. Foram utilizados Frey (2000), Sarmiento (2012), Lascoumes e Galès (2012) e Mainardes, Ferreira e Tello (2011) para fundamentar a discussão. Trata-se, portanto, de um estudo bibliográfico de caráter qualitativo. Assim, o presente estudo buscou evidenciar que a política pública e a política educacional são instrumentos do Estado que devem contribuir para a sociedade, qualificando as práticas de órgãos públicos e tornando-os mais acessíveis.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Políticas públicas. Políticas educacionais. Estado.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo propone una breve reflexión sobre la noción de implementación de políticas públicas, estableciendo un paralelismo entre los medios por los que se establecen como instrumento de organización de la estructura pública y sus consecuencias, que acaban influyendo en la sociedad y en su organización. Para apoyar la discusión se utilizaron Frey (2000), Sarmiento (2012), Lascoumes y Galès (2012) y Mainardes, Ferreira y Tello (2011). Se trata, por lo tanto, de un estudio bibliográfico cualitativo. Así, este estudio buscó mostrar que la política pública y la política educativa son instrumentos del Estado que deben contribuir con la sociedad cualificando las prácticas de los órganos públicos y haciéndolas más accesibles.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Políticas públicas. Políticas educativas. Estado.

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## **Introduction**

In this article, we aim to provide a brief overview of public policy creation based on Klaus Frey's studies (2000), especially concerning the basic concepts of implementing educational policies in developing countries. This perspective also incorporates the studies of George Sarmiento (2012), who analyzes the growing debate on this subject, highlighting the importance of asserting rights related to improvements in the social structure. It is necessary to make the appropriate adaptations to the analysis instruments in the Brazilian context, understanding the specificities of the political and social scenario.

According to Frey (2000), three approaches can be highlighted for a better understanding of the concept of public policies: (i) understanding the political system and the actions taken for the common good in the national context; (ii) understanding the articulation between the political forces involved in the decision-making process and the strategies used; and (iii) the relationship established between the notion of public policy and other policies and their connections.

In this scenario, the structure and organization of public policies are due to the emergence of social democracy, which means that policies aimed at specific sectors are expanded to society while undergoing adaptations to truly consolidate everyday life in their political, economic, cultural, and social interfaces. According to Frey (2000), in Brazil, due to the institutional structure of its policies, this movement is little explored:

[...] in Brazil, studies on public policies have only recently been conducted. In these still sporadic studies, emphasis was placed on analyzing structures and institutions or the characterization of the negotiation processes of specific sectoral policies (FREY, 2000, p. 214, our translation).

Therefore, it is necessary to consider the different dimensions and variations according to the focus and justifications proposed for the study of public policies in Brazil since the established political structure is shaped by the existing social conditions in the country. In this sense, it is possible to draw a parallel with Brazilian educational institutions, which in the public domain end up conditioning daily practices in accordance with each political action developed in each region, regardless of its creation period. Thus, the field of dispute within the governmental structure will always leave marks on the production of projects, the definition of public policies, and their scope.

In this scenario, the theme "public policy in Brazil" has been mentioned more frequently, including in academic studies, and has gained prominence in the mass media. It is

observed that in developing countries, where study instruments have been adjusted to democracies and specifically to their particularities, there is a greater concern from various sectors of society paying attention to the proposals of each government. It is also possible to note adopted directions as state practice and the continuity of actions in everyday life, as citizens increasingly seek access to basic rights necessary for their living context, among which income generation programs, access to health, and education can be highlighted.

In this sense, there is an increase in the implementation of public policies through government programs and actions to assert rights, aiming to offer tangible social advances in society. However, some abrupt limitations should be considered during government changes, where there is certain flexibility or loosening of these previously implemented social policies that can be characterized as regression or loss of rights.

Given this, it is appropriate to consider that:

In Brazil, public policies have become one of the most important themes for the effectiveness of economic, social, and cultural rights. We all know that access to health, housing, education, transportation, infrastructure, employment, social security, the environment, and historical heritage depends on their adequate implementation (SARMENTO, 2012, p. 9, our translation).

Legally, the State is responsible for disseminating positive actions for society, undertaking to centralize certain basic activities, which must be considered as a primary necessity. In other words, social rights require centrality or direction from the public sector, encompassing the service to the entire population without restriction. Some political actors, such as secretaries or ministers, take on certain actions they consider priorities or comply with orders from higher instances. However, this adjustment of priorities can often strain or loosen a relationship with public entities at different levels of the state structure, altering the balance of power regarding a particular policy.

Linking this understanding to the reflection proposed by Sarmento (2012), it can be considered that the adoption of classical models for the development of public policies led only by State initiative becomes outdated, as it is necessary to consider various elements in proposing a public policy, especially based on the new interactions established among different social actors - who can be public or private agents, third-sector institutions, foundations, national and international financial corporations, among others - all with some power that directly or indirectly influences practical actions and decision-making.

An example of this is reflected in debates about the quality and access to education. According to Sarmiento (2012), the development of a public policy is linked to the organization and the place that these different social actors occupy in the democratic State of rights, establishing a relationship in a pendulum format, which can operate in two ways: i) *from top to bottom* with decisions defined by the executive power, by secretaries and the legislature that will determine how one or more actions should be carried out; or ii) *from bottom to top* in a flat structure, where leadership demands from public representatives actions that establish social projects and programs capable of addressing their local demands.

In this sense,

[...] the policy formulation process is considered a continuous cycle, in which policies are the context of influence, text production, and practice context. These contexts are closely linked and interrelated, have no temporal or sequential dimension, and do not constitute linear stages. Each presents arenas, places, and interest groups and involves disputes and conflicts (MAINARDES; FERREIRA; TELLO, 2011, p. 157, our translation).

It is essential to consider how the public agenda is established: a) from a problem or issue that requires state/governmental intervention; b) from a general and popular need; or c) from a problem that must be framed within the state structure to be solved<sup>4</sup> (SARMENTO, 2012). Thus, sectoral policy fosters changes considered in the State's action, and new political actors emerge, causing a more significant movement in the political landscape.

Regarding sectoral policies consolidated with relatively stable decision structures, it is legitimate to consider the institutional factor as an independent variable. But if this is not the case, that is, if preliminary empirical studies show a significant dynamic of institutional structures, it must be assumed that there is at least partial dependence between the policies to be examined and the institutional variable (FREY, 2000, p. 217-218, our translation).

Thus, it is possible to note that demands *from bottom to top* generally occur due to failures in policy implementation. What reinforces this understanding is that many of these laws require specific regulations and adjustments, which can be made through enacting other laws or decrees. To explain, it is valid to analyze the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (LDBEN 9394/96), which initially did not clearly present the mandatory teaching of

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<sup>4</sup> Making a connection with the scenario of Brazilian education, we can observe, through debates related to the elaboration of the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) and the reform of High Schools, various sectors such as employers' and workers' unions, educational conglomerates, publishing houses, universities, religious groups, among others, not only addressing these points but also exerting their influence in decision-making.



Philosophy and Sociology in the High School curriculum nor the approach to ethnic-racial issues in the basic education curriculum guidelines (BRASIL, 1996).

These omissions mobilized groups of professionals from these curricular components, as well as entities linked to the black movement, who pressured the State to create complementary legislation that would more effectively (re)adjust the curricula of Brazilian states.

With this example, it was observed that the examination of sectoral actions constitutes a significant dynamic in interdependencies, being permanent due to the numerous subjects present in each context and situation.

Another point to consider is the role of public agents responsible for managing these policies, as highlighted by Sarmiento (2012),

[...] the actors could act with a certain autonomy, elaborate structures, or conceive original systems to achieve better results. This space of freedom is justified by the fact that government programs are full of ambiguities, omissions, and contradictions without a rigorous distribution of competencies. In other words, research has turned to the implementers as essential elements for the success of policies (SARMENTO, 2012, p. 18, our translation).

In this perspective, and drawing a parallel with Max Weber (2004), it is possible to conceive the public agent as an actor responsible for writing and carrying out a specific public action, i.e., as an actor responsible for public policy development. This dimension carries institutional weight but also an individual character that can influence the scope of implementation and execution of public policies.

In other words, it is relevant to consider the individual actions of this agent, as there is a need for a more technical characterization for the development and monitoring of the execution process of a specific public policy, as this also establishes room for possible flaws in this process, given the profile of the actor occupying this space. In this context, monitoring by the population becomes necessary, operating as a means to legally adjust the horizon of possibilities for social control over public power, and in this case, communication channels have been providing greater interaction between public authorities and the population.

Another point to consider is the complexity of service demands, the diversity of the public served in basic public education across different social, cultural, and economic levels, and the scenario of the struggle for representation and the right of access and permanence. For this, Sarmiento's (2012) concept of "public arenas" was mobilized, starting from the understanding of the place where public agents and social representatives from different

segments engage in debates and argue in favor of their interests, thus contributing to the strengthening of their political action and the consolidation of the constitution of a solid democratic space. This is called a "social fact," where a "public problem" is imposed, i.e., a political issue that needs to be solved and requires the interaction of different subjects and social actors.

In the words of Sarmiento (2012, p. 23, our translation),

[...] This *social fact* can become a public issue when social actors (individuals or collectives) show interest in it and propose solutions to resolve it. The cause gains legitimacy and visibility with the support of civil society groups. Groups that had no involvement with the facts began to take positions and express themselves collectively.

The network of social actors mobilized to develop a public policy and the state framework that supports this network must be considered. For the proposition of a public policy, it is essential to reflect on the procedures involving decision-making in a society governed by a modern democratic system, which is linked to a federal constitution that legislates in different contexts, being able to exert significant influence on the results obtained. In this perspective, a noteworthy question is how normative structures, responsible for regulating the conduct of actors and institutions, operate, especially regarding budget distribution and the establishment of routines and procedures for the execution of public policies.

According to Frey (2000, p. 221, our translation),

Networks of actors that form around specific policies can be considered antagonistic to the institutional type of hierarchy. The particular characteristics of policy networks include a horizontal structure of competencies, a relatively high communicative density, and, interrelated with this, a comparatively intense mutual control.

This design can also be considered in the educational context, considering that these networks and relationships revolve around essential rights to education for everyone. However, it is worth noting that this movement tends to be constantly institutionalized, and the individuals involved may be persuaded to focus on more specific issues.

In this movement, public agents can build various actions in dialogue with other social actors to develop public policies. It is in this collaborative construction network that the possibility of breaking with the logic of a rigid and inflexible hierarchy on the part of the State is observed.

Therefore, by establishing these partnerships and conducting a survey of the opinions of the main stakeholders collectively, focusing on the result of desirable actions for the implementation of public policy, a demand is created that compels the state to respond legally. This set of actions contributes to the development of a stability component, which can only be observed with the effective action of the state about the socially indicated demand.

In this way, a qualitative bibliographic study was carried out, which, according to Marconi and Lakatos (1999), requires the researcher to resort to scientific productions to answer inquiries from a previously identified problem:

The problem must be raised, formulated, preferably in the form of a question, and delimited with indications of the variables that intervene in the study of possible relationships among themselves. It is a continuous process of reflective thinking, whose formulation requires previous knowledge of the subject (informational materials) alongside creative imagination (MARCONI; LAKATOS, 1999, p. 28, our translation).

Thus, through a bibliographic reference, this article is divided into two sections: "*As políticas públicas e seus reflexos na política educacional* (Public policies and their reflections on educational policy)," which seeks to address, based on Frey (2000), Sarmiento (2012), Lascoumes and Galès (2012), and Mainardes; Ferreira e Tello (2011), how educational policies respond to the demands of civil society. In the "Educational policy" section and the "Final considerations," the actors mobilized in the context of public policies for education are addressed, in addition to the conclusion.

### **Public Policies and Their Reflections on Educational Policy**

Considering this scope of social demand and state response, Sarmiento (2012) asserts that the tools used in public actions are mechanisms and technical procedures that materialize a governmental project related to social rights.

Thus, the development, implementation, and realization of a public policy reflect on educational policy, promoting repercussions and revisions of guidelines and curricula at the federal, State, and municipal levels.

The insights from Frey (2000) and Sarmiento (2012) contribute to understanding how the State responds to the demands imposed by civil society. It is necessary to provide a response; however, how this response is transformed into legislation is the government's responsibility. This means that there are certain limitations, and often, the public structure



does not offer conditions for public agents to formulate more effective actions. Thus, it is necessary to make cuts to meet the demand. In practice, the State responds to society in what is common to the interests of both sides.

In complementing this understanding, Lascoumes and Galès (2012) signal the role of the State, stating:

[...] the State expresses the general will that imposes itself on particular interests. The general interest is an argumentative construction that allows the administration to synthesize the transfiguration of particular interests or domination relationships. The top-down or hierarchical version of public policies gives rulers the power to select problems that, among countless challenges, are likely to be inscribed on the political agenda or to be the subject of decision or implementation of a public policy (LASCOUMES; GALÈS, 2012, p. 103, our translation).

Thus, to establish any governmental action, it is necessary to combine a structural and professional apparatus that can understand how certain practices come to be carried out, truly becoming a reflection in the public context. According to Lascoumes and Galès (2012), it is necessary to separate the decision-making moment from action in everyday social life, with the decision-making moment being something built over a period of time. As an example, we can mention the progress of Bill (PL) 1641/2003, which proposed the mandatory inclusion of Philosophy and Sociology disciplines in the high school curriculum, completed on 06/02/2008 with the promulgation of the law above (BRASIL, 2003a).

In this example, it can be observed that everyday action occurs when the public machinery begins to act alongside society, meeting its demands and making adjustments for each locality. Here, it is important to weigh the role of the public agent and their role in implementing a law.

Particularly in the context of Sociology, Lascoumes, and Galès (2012) highlight the importance of these individuals in decision-making as a sequence of public policies and revisit the studies of Harold Lasswell (1951, p. 105, our translation):

[...] trying to understand public policies in action, beyond decision moments. His contribution considered public policies as a process that unfolds over time, obeying different logics, which relativizes the importance of the decision viewed in isolation.

In dialogue with Sarandy (2001), it is appropriate to analyze the debates on reintroducing Sociology into the basic education curriculum, considering the specific characteristics discussed throughout the legislative process.

The elements mentioned so far can support studies and research in various fields, varying according to the time, logic, and the process in which they were developed. This same movement can be observed in relation to other processes, such as, for example, the inclusion of the mandatory teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in the basic education curriculum, starting from Law No. 10,639/2003, amended by Law 11,645/2008<sup>5</sup> (BRASIL, 2003b, 2008). Thus, it can be affirmed that there is no difference in the core of public policy since the action of popular movements is a fundamental component in proposing inclusive and equitable policies.

According to Lascoumes and Galès (2012), this entire movement constitutes various elements in articulation: the action of public agents, institutional organization, definition of methodologies, partnerships with other institutions, development of materials, etc. Each piece can be connected in different ways, changing with each moment of experimentation in practice, dialoguing with other existing public policies, which do not cease to exist but adjust to social reality.

To complement this idea, we turn to the words of Mainardes, Ferreira, and Tello (2011, p. 158, our translation):

The context analysis refers to the background and pressures that led to managing a specific policy. This includes economic, social, and political factors that led the issue to be included in the political agenda. There are also influences from pressure groups and social movements. In addition to aspects of the contemporary context, the analysis needs to consider the historical background of the policy, including initiatives already constructed. Such considerations about the contemporary and historical context help illuminate the reasons that drove the emergence of the policy at a specific moment.

In practice, when analyzing the content of an educational policy, it is necessary to understand its objectives, implicit and explicit values, what is or is not silenced in its production, and its context of application. Making an analogy, public policy is composed of several layers that adjust over time, like a tree: the older practices are rooted and provide support for the new branches, which grow from the monitoring of civil society and state support through subsidies, conditions, and structure for its effective consolidation.

In parallel, Mainardes, Ferreira, and Tello (2011) emphasize that since the 1980s, research on public policies has become central in many studies, expanding the possibilities of

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<sup>5</sup> Law 11,645/2008 amends Law No. 9,394 of December 20, 1996, modified by Law No. 10,639 of January 9, 2003, which establishes the guidelines and bases for national education, to include in the official curriculum of the education system the mandatory inclusion of the theme "Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous History and Culture."

investigation on the subject, using references from Political Science and Sociology. With this, the space for studying educational policies expands and gains strength.

### **Educational Policy**

The article aimed to understand how public policies impact educational policies in general and especially in the Brazilian context. To achieve this purpose, a broad theoretical framework is employed to succinctly provide the context of the relationships among the actors involved in the set of actions to propose and implement a specific policy.

Therefore, when addressing educational policy, it is crucial to emphasize that, within the state structure, various actors are mobilized through distinct relationships that are socially significant. Hence, the state serves as a regulatory element in these public or private relationships in the context of collectivity. Among the regulatory instruments, we can mention the constancy of complementary laws, such as LDBEN 9394/96 (BRASIL, 1996).

After its promulgation, the mentioned Law underwent various adjustments to address situations inadequately covered in the Education Magna Carta, such as the emergence of new legal provisions to clarify or expand points that society needed, which were previously addressed in a more general and/or implicit manner. Following the same line, other Decrees and Resolutions operationalize the Law, constituting more specific mechanisms or more effective regulatory elements.

An example is the Complementary Law, which makes Sociology and Philosophy mandatory in primary education. Other examples of adjustments include the creation of the Maintenance and Development Fund for Elementary Education and Teacher Enhancement (FUNDEF), the Maintenance and Development Fund for Basic Education (FUNDEB), the National Education Plan (PNE), and the organization of education systems at the federal, state, and municipal levels, vocational education, among other key points.

Social demands face strong challenges due to the cost-benefit issue, and this is a challenge for the effective guarantee of any social right achieved or sought by society, aiming to address any deficiencies. In managing the state, each government faces significant difficulties in opting for measures capable of meeting the needs of society, demonstrating that there are still major flaws in the implementation of public actions precisely because these actions fail to cover everything. There is a lack of capillarity in following a logic that

undergoes few changes. A good example of this is the universalization of social rights, which, despite its reach, harbors numerous paradoxes, as warned by Saviani (2007, our translation):

[...] the logic that governs them makes them prisoners of a vicious circle fraught with paradoxes: poor children would perform better in school if their parents were more actively involved in their education, but for that, they should have a better and higher level of education, precisely what has been denied to them. Poor children would succeed in school if they didn't have to work, but they need to work precisely because they are poor. These paradoxes also manifest themselves in the economic field: workers would be more productive if they had a higher and better level of education, but to have a higher level of education, they would need to be more productive so that the country's economy could generate the resources that would allow greater investment in education (SAVIANI, 2007, p. 5, our translation).

Society, even at a slow pace, has been seeking improvements in social conditions through some segments, both in the public and private sectors, and some achievements have been attained and legitimized despite all the shortcomings pointed out here. Public policies have modified the public sector, making state apparatuses more accessible to the population, obviously with some caveats. In the private sector, it is possible to observe a greater discussion about education regarding training students to improve technical quality through primary education. Thus, it is concluded that policies aimed at education have, in their structure, the means to organize and manage resources according to the capacity to meet increasingly evident demands.

Regarding educational policy, the framework mobilized in the construction of this article points to three types of in-depth studies, offering possibilities to verify how certain actions are reflecting on the social context and unfolding in everyday education, namely: i) observe models that provide subsidies for studies and interpretations of policies; ii) investigate the group of demands related to educational policies; and iii) critically analyze specific educational policies. For Ball and Mainardes (2011), these in-depth studies can help researchers clarify how they position themselves theoretically, directing the epistemological focus they will follow in their research.

In educational policy, the technical function of public agents assumes a crucial role, as these agents will determine the structuring of formations and the most appropriate approach for implementing a policy. This involves understanding how social actors, in this case, professionals from the state network, should carry out formative actions capable of disseminating the necessary information to meet the demands of the curriculum. In theory, there should be feedback from this base to these professionals, thus establishing a dialogue,

making it plausible to assess whether educational policy is indeed fulfilling its purpose when applied, which is not always possible, given the organization of the state institutions themselves.

It is important to highlight that the study of specific policies raises the question of how the theoretical approach assists in understanding more specific policies and how these actions are incorporated or establishing a relationship with the broader and practical part of the developing policy. Moreover, any type of policy may be unfeasible to implement or not meet the supposed need for which it was initially created, being just another narrative or rhetorical construction from a point of view about society.

Policies, particularly educational policies, are generally conceived and written for contexts that have adequate infrastructure and working conditions (at any level of education) without taking into account enormous variations in context, resources, regional inequalities, or local capabilities (BALL; MAINARDES, 2011, p. 13, our translation).

Thus, according to Ball and Mainardes (2011), each policy adopted by the State creates a space for articulation and organization, which can contribute to formulating legislation and, properly, to the action that can represent and develop establishing a foundation.

In the words of Ball and Mainardes (2011, p. 13, our translation),

The flows of policy are also flows of discourse – metalanguages that guide people to live as people. New narratives about what counts as good education are being articulated and validated. Thus, we need critical language and an analytical method that allows us to deal with these new policy forms. We need a non-linear language that does not attribute more rationality to policy than it deserves. Policies involve confusion, needs (legal and institutional), conflicting beliefs and values, incoherent and contradictory, pragmatism, borrowing, creativity, and experimentation, asymmetric power relations (of various types), sedimentation, gaps and spaces, dissent, and material and contextual constraints.

In this way, the State and its structure stand out as the main political actors, responsible for organizing public policies and defining guidelines for the regulation of society, as well as for the adopted conception in the field of education and the realization of educational rights for all. In this context, a symbolic character is initially observed, transcending the organization of practices in its dynamics.

## **Final considerations**

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that any policy follows a flow and, when developed and implemented, can acquire greater robustness, especially in the case of Brazilian public education. An example of this is the debate surrounding the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), which constitutes a normative document to establish criteria in education, addressing minimum and common contents to be included in basic education, as well as issues related to integral and inclusive education, among other aspects.

However, it is worth noting that external forces acting on the formulation of public policies, such as social or elitist movements, are not solely responsible for it, just as governments are not. It is believed that the effectiveness of these actions depends on a certain autonomy of the State, which is capable of creating or not creating conditions for its implementation (SOUZA, 2006).

In conclusion, this article engaged with the three dimensions of public policy, starting with the institutional, procedural, and material dimensions, to understand how an educational policy is constituted and what effects can be envisaged from its implementation. It is hoped to contribute to the reflection on other ways of understanding the organization and functionality of the public machinery in its articulation with everyday education.

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### ***CRediT Author Statement***

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- Acknowledgements:** We would like to express our gratitude to Prof. Dr. Sebastião de Souza Lemes for the support and encouragement in the production of this work during the courses of the doctoral program of the Graduate Program in School Education – Unesp/FCLAr.
  - Funding:** Funded by the Graduate Program in School Education – Unesp/FCLAr (Funding for publication).
  - Conflicts of interest:** There are no conflicts of interest.
  - Ethical approval:** Not applicable.
  - Data and material availability:** The bibliographical references are available on the internet, as referenced in the work.
  - Authors' contributions:** Celso Francisco do Ó contributed to the construction and framing of the study. Caio Vinicius dos Santos and Carla Cristina Biazi Lorenzi contributed to the text's study, writing, and revision.
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**Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.**  
Proofreading, formatting, normalization and translation.

