

BOOK REVIEW**POLICY ANALYSIS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS:
A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH****Author: NICOLA A. ALEXANDER****Pearson, 2012, 240 pages, \$120.00****ISBN-10: 013701600X****Allyn & Bacon Educational Leadership Series***Reviewers: Jameson Lopez and Robert Vagi
Arizona State University***Abstract**

Education reformers' emphasis on accountability has placed unprecedented pressure on education practitioners. Consequently, the need to find solutions to complex problems has never been greater, particularly at the local level. Many policy analysis texts, however, are either written for non-educators or are intended for advanced policy analysts. Nicola Alexander's "Policy Analysis for Educational Leaders: A Step-by-Step Approach" provides education practitioners with a comprehensive, readable resource for creating and implementing effective policies.

INTRODUCTION

In “Policy Analysis for Educational Leaders: A Step-by-Step Approach” (2012), Dr. Nicola Alexander aims to offer a practical guide for policy analysis for educational leaders. Policy analysis can be a complicated process that leaves some wondering where to begin. Others may struggle to turn their analysis into action. To this end, Alexander excels by offering readers a detailed method that begins with identifying a problem and ends with ensuring that a policy is, in her words, making “the world a better place” (p. 5). Far from being prescriptive, this text echoes the assertion that policy analysis is an iterative process (Bardach, 2009; Duke, 2004) that is often times more art than science (Patton & Sawicki, 1993).

Laying the Foundation

Alexander begins by discussing two fundamental aspects of policy analysis. First, policy analysts must know and make explicit their personal values and philosophical positions. As Alexander points out, several scholars have rejected the notion of objectivity in policy analysis (Dunn, 2004; Heck, 2004). This stems from the fact that definitions of policy issues and resulting alternatives are inextricably linked to beliefs and values. Rather than claiming to be objective, Alexander recommends that policy analysts make their values explicit. Second, policy analysts must understand the issue that they will address. To this end, Alexander offers a useful framework that begins by identifying a troubling *condition*, a “basic description of the world that can be supported by empirical data” (p.29). Next, policy analysts must determine if a condition is a *policy problem*. Policy problems are characterized by three criteria: they have been shown to be negative, they can be solved using public resources, and they *should* be solved using public resources. Finally, if there is disagreement over which solution is most appropriate, then the policy problem is a *policy issue*. According to Alexander, only policy issues require analysis because there is no need to determine a best solution if it is already agreed upon. When policy analysts have established their guiding values and have identified a policy issue, they are ready to begin analysis.

Analyzing the Issue

Policy analysts must make a case for change by assembling evidence. Evidence comes in many forms and can include quantitative and qualitative data. Whatever its form, policy analysts must decide which evidence will be most valuable so that time and energy are not wasted. After assembling evidence, analysts should develop policy alternatives. Alexander is quick to point out that policy alternatives are not policy outcomes, nor are they implementation plans. Rather, they are specific courses of action that will be used to mitigate a negative condition. Once a list of alternatives has been developed, each alternative must be weighed using the following criteria: effectiveness, equity, cost, political feasibility, and implementation feasibility. Though each of these is important, political and implementation feasibility deserve special attention, since a policy can only be effective if it has been accepted and put into practice. To this end, Alexander stresses the importance of knowing the political and administrative contexts of a policy issue.

Making Change Happen

Citing Fowler (2009), Alexander states that policy issues are, by their nature, controversial. For this reason, policy analysts must be strategic when advocating for and implementing a policy decision. This begins by persuading relevant decision makers that a policy option is suitable. To do this, Alexander suggests that readers know their audience, use appropriate arguments, and communicate clearly. Persuading decision makers, however, is just the beginning. Once decision makers accept a policy recommendation, it must be implemented. Successful implementation will account for possible challenges related to people, processes, and institutions and will use formative assessments to make adjustments along the way. Finally, policy analysts must determine if a policy should remain in practice by using summative evaluations. Far from being the end of the policy analysis process, summative evaluations often lead to new or revised policy alternatives that will better address the problematic condition.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this book is a great introductory guide to policy analysis in real-world settings. It is written concisely and with clarity in a simple format that both beginning and experienced policy analysts can follow. The education vignettes at the beginning of each chapter provide readers with meaningful scenarios while the “resources for further study” offer opportunities for deeper consideration. Furthermore, this text is unique in its inclusion of chapters dealing with implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, something that other authors have ignored. *Policy Analysis for Educational Leaders* will be a welcome addition to the libraries of those looking to find solutions to real-world policy problems.

Despite its many strengths, this text is not immune to criticism. While most will appreciate its breadth, others may feel that some topics are not described in sufficient depth. For instance, in her discussion of philosophical worldviews, Alexander devotes only a few pages to topics like pragmatism, phenomenology, postmodernism, and critical theory. Similarly, the chapter dealing with evaluation summarizes complex quantitative methodologies in just a few paragraphs. Although thorough treatments of these subjects are beyond the scope of this book, experienced policy analysts may find it necessary to consult more advanced texts.

With regard to Alexander’s chapter dealing with evaluation, readers might benefit from a more thorough discussion of specific methodologies and how they can be applied to real-world issues. This might include commonly used approaches like decision-oriented evaluation, utilization-oriented evaluation, and empowerment-driven evaluation (Fitzpatrick, 2011). These methodologies and others like them are frequently used in program evaluation and their inclusion in this text would benefit readers.

Readers may also find Alexander’s chapter devoted to persuading one’s audience lacking. Specifically, it overlooks challenges that may arise when policy analysts communicate their findings to policymakers, something that most education practitioners and leaders have little experience with. In future editions, the author might consider including sections that describe challenges related to gaining access to policymakers and analyzing political and policy contexts.

Finally, Alexander relies heavily on the work of other scholars. Though this offers valuable insight, at times, the book reads like a synthesis of literature. These instances, however, are few and far between and are overshadowed by the many innovative concepts that Alexander presents.

Through this text, Alexander accomplishes her goal of providing a practical, step-by-step approach to policy analysis. Because it is tailored to meet the needs of educational leaders, this text makes a unique and much-needed contribution to the policy analysis literature. We highly recommend *Policy Analysis for Educational Leaders* because of its clarity, logical sequence, and focus on practice. This is an essential text for anyone who is interested in education policy, especially those working in the field.

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