

Role of Educational Administrators and Teachers in Implementing Educational Policies

Mir Hadi Moazen Jamshidi^{1*}, Mohammad Ghasempour^{2*}, Seyedeh Niloufar Tavakoli Lahijani³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

²Master of Public Administration, Payame Noor University, Rasht, Iran

³Master of Organizational Behaviour Management, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

*Corresponding authors:

Abstract

Street-level bureaucracy is a research area in public administration that has received less attention in our country and encompasses a significant portion of employees in government organizations, including operational staff. This study aimed to answer the question of whether school managers and teachers in Iran can be considered street-level bureaucrats. Additionally, this study seeks to address the conditions under which these individuals can act as useful and effective street-level bureaucrats. This is a qualitative study that collected data through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding methods. The interviewees in this study were school managers, teachers, and educational administration managers from the capital of Gilan Province, located in northern Iran, who were selected purposefully. The results of the study indicate that school managers and teachers influence the functioning of the educational structure in various ways and, when favorable conditions are present, can serve as effective and useful bureaucrats in achieving the goals of educational policy.

Keywords: Street-Level Bureaucracy, Public Policy Drivers, School Managers and Teachers, Iranian Educational System

Introduction

One of the most important and challenging areas of study in public policymaking is the implementation of public policies, a concern that has always occupied policymakers and government officials. Deficiencies in implementation have often led to the failure of public policies, resulting in significant costs for the government. In some studies, the concept of **Street-Level Bureaucracy** and its role in policy implementation has been addressed by scholars in public administration (Danaii Fard et al., 2018: 64). Although street-level bureaucrats operate at lower levels, they shape the actual actions of governments. They implement public policies because their jobs are highly stable, and their tenure is considerable. Teachers, firefighters, police officers, and many law enforcement staff are considered street-level bureaucrats. These employees directly interact with the public and clients of both government and non-government organizations. Although they may not be formally responsible for responding to the public, they have a better understanding of the demands and interests of the people compared to policymakers. Furthermore, these employees, due to their social status, wield significant power and can control key resources in government organizations (Tahmasebi, 2020: 107). The widespread role of street-level bureaucrats indicates that attention to their function and the impact of their performance on policy implementation outcomes is crucial. In the Iranian educational system, with around ninety-two thousand active schools, this translates to approximately ninety-two thousand school principals and over 750,000 teachers. Based on the nature of their roles, these individuals can be considered street-level bureaucrats. A large group of street-level bureaucrats directly interact with over 14 million students, and consequently, with a significant portion of the country's population. Given the important role of street-level bureaucrats, the lack of alignment between school managers and teachers with the overarching goals of national educational policies could pose serious challenges to policy implementation. If a conflict of interest arises between policymakers and this large group of street-level

bureaucrats, it could lead to long-term social and political crises. Education is a fundamental factor for social, economic, cultural, and political development (Golabgir et al., 2020: 60), and improving the quality of education is a key concern in most countries (Azizi Torab et al., 2022: 39). Failure to recognize the vital role of the educational system in training human resources—the primary capital in the production of goods and services—could lead to inefficiency and the eventual collapse and deterioration of society. Given the critical role of school managers and teachers in the educational system and the necessity of considering them as street-level bureaucrats, this research aims to address the following questions:

1. What characteristics do teachers and school managers possess as street-level bureaucrats?
2. How do school managers and teachers in public schools affect the outcomes of national policy implementation?
3. What factors facilitate the performance of school managers and teachers within the bureaucratic structure?
4. What intervening factors can lead to inefficiency in the implementation of educational policies by school managers and teachers?
5. What strategies should be used to enhance the effectiveness of school managers and teachers as useful and effective bureaucrats?

Searches conducted in scientific databases, journals, and research centers on this topic indicate that the role of street-level bureaucrats, especially teachers, school managers, and education staff, in implementing educational policies has been relatively overlooked. This research may open new perspectives for formulating national educational policies. It aims to provide a fresh look at the responsibilities of school managers and teachers within the framework of street-level bureaucracy, ultimately enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the policies implemented. By changing the perception of the role of school managers and teachers as street-level bureaucrats, a new environment may be created to ensure their effective involvement in the implementation of national educational policies.

1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Implementation of Public Policy

Public administration is filled with definitions of public policy (Coyle et al., 2024). Overall, what is commonly shared across all these definitions is that policy refers to a process or a pattern of activities or decisions aimed at addressing public problems—both real and perceived. The implementation of public policy is considered the cornerstone of public administration. While there are numerous definitions of policy implementation, in a general sense, it means the execution of laws, wherein various actors, organizations, methods, and techniques interact to realize the goals of a proposed program or policy (Ghorbanizadeh et al., 2016: 69-70).

Street-Level Bureaucracy

In today's world, schools are considered the most important source of knowledge acquisition, talent development, and insight—especially for students—and are a key focus of government officials (Yavari et al., 2017: 22). The focal point of both small and large changes in administrative systems is *bureaucracy*, which provides the structure and administrative capacity. The emergence of a dynamic administrative system can influence the creation and reform of institutions, as well as the ongoing processes of daily decision-making. The gaps and components of an emerging administrative system can be analyzed through the ways institutions interact, the decision-making processes, and the dynamics of accountability—both during daily decisions and throughout the phases of institutional establishment, reform, or dissolution (Bauer & Trondal, 2015: 5).

In administrative systems, public sector employees—particularly those who operate at the closest level of service delivery to citizens—are referred to as *street-level bureaucrats*. These street-level bureaucrats act as the executive arm of formulated public policies and play a crucial role in implementing them. Bureaucrats, or those working

within bureaucratic structures, are tasked with delivering services to the end user—i.e., the citizen. Lipsky (2010) tested this hypothesis in the context of police forces and the types of crimes they prioritize.

These staff members operate under dual pressures: on one side, the government demands greater accountability and effectiveness; on the other, citizens expect improved service delivery (Siahkali Moradi et al., 2019: 122). *Street-level bureaucrats* have wide discretionary autonomy in implementing policies, which enables them to adapt policies to the actual needs of the citizens. They can choose which clients to invest more time, energy, or attention in, and determine the extent of resources allocated to each. By doing so, they introduce clear distinctions in how services are delivered to different clients (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022: 281).

Hence, public policies become real only when *street-level bureaucrats* implement them during face-to-face interactions with citizens. Zaka (2017) stresses: “Public policy remains an abstraction until it is implemented. In an important sense, public policy is the sum of actions taken by street-level bureaucrats” (De Boer & Raaphorst, 2021: 1).

The following table outlines the characteristics of *street-level bureaucrats* as identified in previous studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of *Street-Level Bureaucracy* and Associated Concepts and Terms

Sources	Concept	Lipsky, 2010
They are typically considered low-level employees.	Low-level work category	Lipsky, 2010
They shape most of the services provided by the government.	Shaping government services	Lipsky, 2010
They directly interact with citizens.	Direct communication with citizens	Lipsky, 2010
They have extensive authority in performing their duties.	Broad operational authority	Tomers, Becker, 2014
Street-level bureaucrats develop mechanisms for accountability.	Development of accountability mechanisms	Tomers, Becker, 2014
Providing a certain degree of authority increases street-level bureaucrats' willingness to implement policies.	The effect of increasing authority on performance	Tomers, Becker, 2014
They have better relationships with their managers, which allows them to adjust policies or conditions.	Informal communications	Portillo, 2016
They exercise both formal and informal power from the bottom up.	Ability to influence and exert power	Pourazat, 1389 (2010)
The general public sees the real power of bureaucracy in the hands of these lower-level bureaucrats, considering them highly influential.	Ability to influence and exert power	Pourazat, 1389 (2010)
In many cases, they have been the real policymakers in the government system.	Shaping policies and their outcomes	Pourazat, 1389 (2010)
One of the reasons for the influence of street-level bureaucrats is their familiarity and mastery of bureaucratic language.	Mastery of bureaucratic details	Tahmasebi, 1396 (2017)
Their jobs are highly stable, and their employment duration is long.	High job stability	Lipsky, 2010

2. Method

This study is a qualitative research project aiming to explore the role of *school managers and teachers* in the *Iranian educational system* as *street-level bureaucrats*. The participants included school principals, teachers, and central office administrators from the Education Department in the capital city of Gilan Province, located in

northern Iran. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews.

The number of interviewees was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, which was reached after conducting 16 interviews. However, to ensure greater reliability, the interviews continued until the 19th participant. These semi-structured interviews were conducted with both current and former *school managers and teachers* in three different geographical areas under the supervision of the provincial education authority. Some participants were central office administrators with prior experience in teaching and school management.

Interview questions were shared with the participants in advance to allow them to prepare thoroughly. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

3. Findings

Through open coding and further examination of the emerging concepts and commonalities, all concepts were grouped under five core categories during the axial coding phase. These categories align with the main research questions and are presented with relevant tables and interpretations.

- **What are the characteristics of school managers and teachers as street-level bureaucrats?**

The results from the interviews indicate that, according to the participants, *teachers and school managers* within the administrative structure of public education possess characteristics that position them as *street-level bureaucrats*. These traits make them key actors in shaping and implementing the government's macro-level *public policy drivers* in the education sector.

Table 2. Characteristics of Teachers from the Perspective of Street-Level Bureaucracy

number	Concept	Frequency in interviews
1	Direct service providers to the public	11
2	An important part of delivering government services in education	16
3	Direct communication with citizens	14
4	Community acceptance	15
5	Authority in accountability from the perspective of parents	13
6	Trust of the community in school administrators and teachers	11
7	Significant social capital	13
8	Ability to exert direct influence on the minds of learners	7
9	Ability to exert indirect influence on the minds of learners' families	6
10	Shaping educational policies and their outcomes	9
11	Mastery of the details of educational bureaucracy	6
12	Professional and union solidarity	11
13	A human-development role in society	24
14	Teachers as agents of human development	23
15	High knowledge of administrators and teachers regarding service recipients due to continuous interaction	14
16	Informal communication	7
17	Mastery of school administrators and teachers over details	8

- **How do school managers and teachers in public schools influence the outcomes of macro-level policy implementation?**

Based on the concepts extracted from the interviews, as presented in **Table 3**, the following points were identified.

Table 3. Influence of School Managers and Teachers on the Structure of Bureaucracy

Number	Concept	Frequency in interviews
1	Influence on the implementation of educational policies	14
2	Influence on the outcomes of educational policy implementation	16
3	Exercise of power and influence by school administrators and teachers	14
4	Impact of school administrators and teachers on the thinking of students and parents	9
5	Prioritizing organizational goals over personal demands and vice versa	10
6	Influence of informal organizations on formal organizations	11
7	Solidarity and unity among teachers in the form of associations and unions	13

- **What contextual factors facilitate the performance of school managers and teachers within the bureaucratic structure?**

The *facilitating factors* that enhance the performance of *school managers and teachers* as *street-level bureaucrats* are presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Categories of Factors Facilitating the Performance of School Managers and Teachers

number	Concept	Frequency in interviews
1	Influence of mass media	9
2	Growth and development of technology	11
3	The position of awareness in society	14
4	Cultural respect for teachers and professors	13
5	Cultural appreciation for knowledge	15
6	Effective interaction and communication between the frontline and staff	9
7	Establishing effective in-service training programs	9
8	Creating an Educational Leadership Framework	8
9	Use of information and communication technology in the education process and service delivery	10
10	Meritocracy	10

- **What intervening factors may lead to the inefficiency of school managers and teachers in implementing educational policies in the country?**

Table 5 presents the factors that may contribute to the *ineffectiveness of school managers and teachers* in the implementation of *educational policies* within the *Iranian Educational System*.

Table 5. Categories of Intervening and Limiting Factors Affecting School Managers and Teachers

number	Concept	Frequency in interviews
1	Limitation of official powers	8
2	Inefficiency of the education system	11
3	Teacher demotivation	8
4	Instability of the teachers' position	5
5	Economic and livelihood issues	9

6	Lack of attention to the important role of education in the country's development	9
7	Viewing education as a cost factor in the national budget	8

- **What strategies should be used to enhance the effectiveness of school managers and teachers in the Iranian Educational System as productive and influential street-level bureaucrats?**

Table 6 presents the strategies that can be employed to improve the *efficiency and effectiveness* of *school managers and teachers* in the *Iranian Educational System* as *useful and impactful street-level bureaucrats*.

Table 6. Strategies to Enhance the Effectiveness of School Managers and Teachers as Productive and Influential Street-Level Bureaucrats

number	Concept	Frequency in interviews
1	Changing the perspective on education from cost to investment.	12
2	Attention to the economic and livelihood status of educational staff.	17
3	Creating job and economic security.	15
4	Changing the perspective on education from cost to investment.	16
5	Attention to the status of teachers and principals.	11
6	Using technology in education.	14
7	Attention to quality and consideration of working conditions.	9
8	Importance of education and the educational system.	13
9	Empowering teachers and principals.	15

Discussion and Conclusion:

This study aimed to answer the main research questions through a step-by-step exploration of the professional and organizational experiences of interviewees. It examined the perceived roles of school principals and teachers within the bureaucratic structure of the Iranian education system, their influence on the outcomes of macro-level policy implementation, and the facilitating or constraining factors affecting their performance. Embedded within the interview questions were indicators for evaluating whether school principals and teachers could be considered street-level bureaucrats, such that by responding, interviewees essentially addressed this classification and elaborated on how these actors influence policy outcomes. Like other street-level bureaucrats, school principals, and teachers possess tools and characteristics that enable them to affect the implementation of high-level policies. This stems from a universal truth about bureaucratic systems: frontline employees across such organizations tend to share certain traits. (1) A large portion of organizational resources is devoted to tasks defined as frontline missions. (2) These employees have the most in-depth understanding of the organization's clients, allowing for profound psychological insight into their beliefs, decisions, and choices. (3) Due to their daily engagement with regulations, frontline staff gain extensive knowledge of bureaucratic procedures and a better grasp of rules and guidelines, enhancing their bargaining power with mid-level managers and often granting them greater interactive leverage with upper-level managers, thereby expanding informal organizational structures and their influence. (4) Their deep familiarity with laws and regulations allows them to detect weaknesses and potential workarounds, meaning that dissatisfaction or unwillingness can hinder proper policy implementation. (5) Their direct interaction with clients also enables them to influence client choices—if resistant to a policy, they can steer clients toward alternatives that diverge from official strategies, thereby affecting policy outcomes. (6) As the most populous segment of bureaucratic systems, frontline employees can potentially form an informal interactive network across various departments, granting them remarkable influence over managerial decisions and even shaping overarching policy directions. Based on these findings, school principals and teachers in Iran exhibit the key features of street-level bureaucrats and can be definitively identified as the creators of street-level bureaucracy within the Iranian education system. Ultimately, the following model was derived as the outcome of the study.

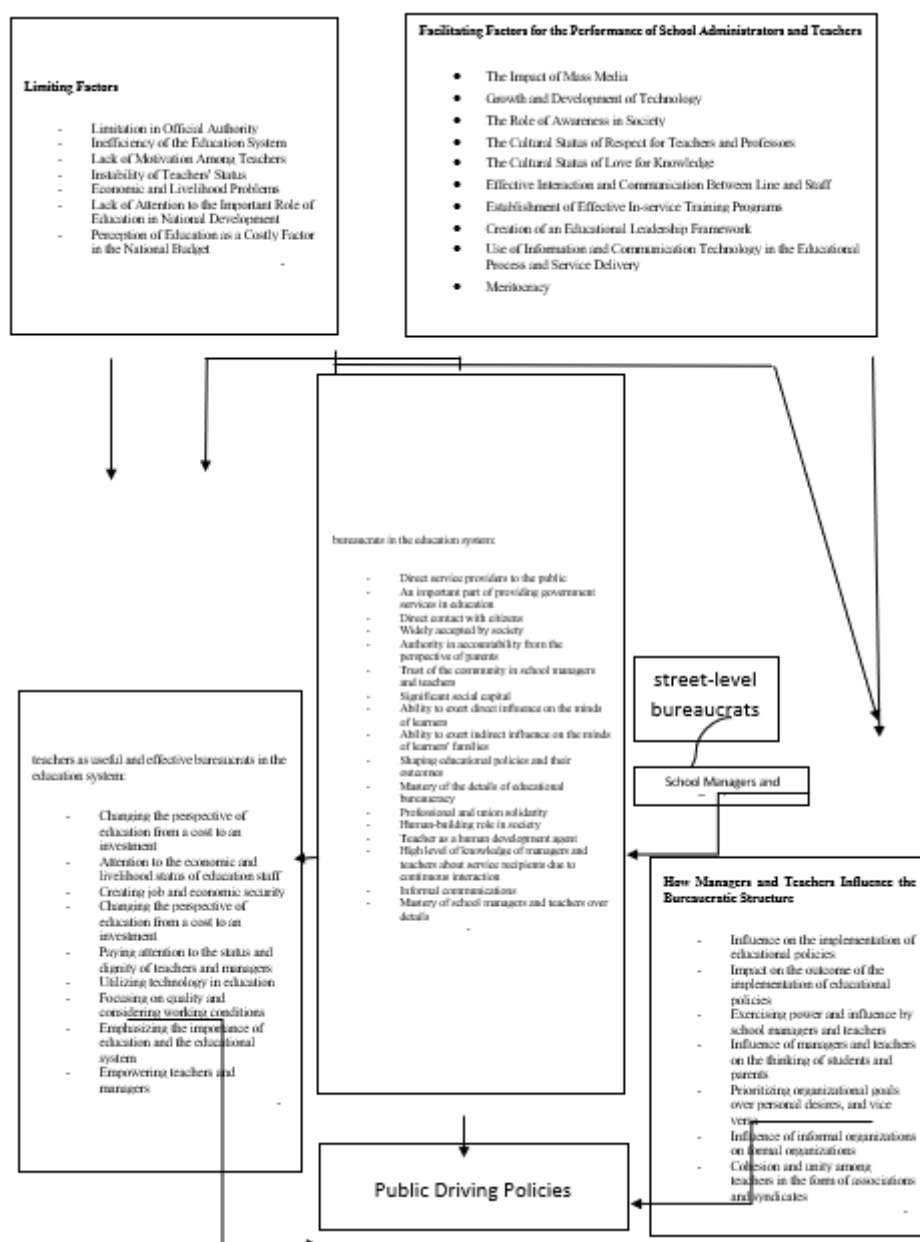


Figure 1. The Final Model of School Principals and Teachers as Street-Level Bureaucrats

According to the Model in Figure 1, School Managers and Teachers:

The findings of this study reveal that school principals and teachers possess characteristics aligned with street-level bureaucracy, enabling them to influence the outcomes of the implementation of macro-level educational policies. According to the research results, their influence extends across various areas within the bureaucratic structure, with the greatest impact observed on policy implementation outcomes, as emphasized by participants. In addition, the study shows that both facilitating and constraining factors not only affect strategies but also shape how these actors influence the bureaucratic structure, thereby affecting their capacity to function as street-level bureaucrats. If favorable conditions are met, they can become effective agents in advancing the goals of macro-educational policies. Based on this understanding, several recommendations are proposed: (1) To improve policy implementation in schools, a system should be developed to incorporate the insights of frontline employees—principals and teachers—into the policy-making process. The study found this important for two reasons: first, due to their frontline position and deep understanding of educational missions, their involvement would result in more realistic policies; second, their ultimate responsibility for executing nearly all educational initiatives means

that their resistance could significantly hinder implementation. (2) Given that the core mission of education takes place in schools and that upper management must have a solid understanding of the school environment, a rigorous merit-based system is needed for selecting both school principals and higher-level administrators, ensuring promotions stem from school-level experience rather than political processes. (3) To raise awareness, more robust in-service training programs should be held with educators familiar with the policy-making process. (4) Resources should be allocated in alignment with policy objectives to boost motivation among school staff. (5) Many interviewees expressed dissatisfaction due to inadequate compensation, especially at the operational level, highlighting the need to improve job satisfaction to prevent resistance to policy implementation. (6) Given the significant influence of street-level bureaucrats, fostering awareness and creating academic and intellectual networks among them can encourage collaboration in policy-making, decision-preparation, and decision-making processes. (7) Since little research has been conducted on this topic domestically, further studies are recommended on various aspects of street-level bureaucrats' roles and the factors affecting their professional and organizational behavior. Researchers believe that, in the long term, such efforts would positively impact broader national management and policy-making systems. (8) Finally, given the multiple ways principals and teachers influence the education system, future researchers are advised to conduct quantitative studies on each variable affecting the implementation of educational policies, which could provide practical insights for areas such as human resource planning and more.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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