Educational reform and teachers' decision making: Relationship between the intended and the implemented reading curriculum in Dominican primary schools

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The purpose of this dissertation is to characterize and analyze the specific implementation decisions made by teachers in Dominican primary schools. A new curriculum was developed in 1995 as part of a Ten-Year Plan to reform the educational system. Analyzing what teachers do and the factors that shape their instruction is relevant for improving understanding of curriculum policy and the dynamics of its formulation and enactment.

The study shows how the reading curriculum is implemented across schools and what configuration of conditions influence teachers' decisions regarding what to teach and how to teach reading comprehension. It used data collected through teachers' questionnaires by the Educational Evaluation and Research Consortium (EERC) study conducted from 2005 to 2007. A total of 1349 questionnaires of teachers in 4th, 5th and 6th grade from a representative sample of 200 schools were analyzed.

This research combined variable-oriented quantitative and case-oriented qualitative research approaches. In regards to quantitative techniques, Principal Components Analysis (PCA) and K-Means Cluster Analysis were used. With these methods, three different implementation patterns of the reading curriculum were identified based on teachers' decisions regarding contents taught (comprehension processes and text types), teaching strategies, performance expectations, homework and assessment. The variation in implementation suggests that teachers try to make sense of the policy and make decisions based on their understanding and the characteristics of their context. Therefore, their decisions and actions shape how policies play out in practice.

The central research question was addressed using a qualitative research approach: Fuzzy-Sets Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) was used to identify the conditions that may explain different implementation patterns. Those conditions were related to teacher characteristics (teachers' education, in-service training, experience, perception of students' preparation) and school characteristics (instructional resources, instructional time, frequency of staff meetings or supervision, and strata - public rural, public urban, accredited private). The relationship between these characteristics and curriculum implementation patterns was not clear cut. However, findings suggest that implementation patterns are influenced by structural arrangements of schools (time allocation), school type (private or public), availability of instructional resources and teacher training.