



Parsons, B. M. (2016). Local autism policy networks: Expertise and intermediary organizations. *Educational Policy*, doi:10.1177/0895904816673743

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ABSTRACT The increasing prevalence of diagnoses for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), now one in 68 children according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), presents a number of policy implications. In particular, many of these children become eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Given the specialized expertise and resources required of local education agencies (LEAs), how do they respond to this implementation challenge? In May 2015, an online survey was distributed to various governmental and nongovernmental actors in three Virginia localities to measure the extent of collaboration in local autism policy networks. The findings suggest that these networks are driven by autism-related information, and that nonprofit organizations act as intermediary organizations that bridge disparate stakeholders. The results contribute to our understanding of fragmentation across policy subsystems, with the focus here on education policy, and the implementation challenges related to a rapidly changing policy issue.

SUMMARY

Purpose of Study This study was designed to examine the network relationships between autism service providers who offered supports to fulfil IDEA guidelines. Specifically, they examined the following 4 hypotheses in 3 Virginia Areas.

1. "Local autism policy networks include a cross section of stakeholders from multiple policy subsystem"
2. "Collaboration in local autism policy networks will involve seeking information from stakeholders with relevant education or health expertise about autism"
3. "The cross section of stakeholders corresponds to local autism policy networks that are sparse and involve many bridging ties"
4. "The central actors in local autism policy networks will be intermediary organizations that connect disparate stakeholders across different subsystems"

Framework

The prevalence of autism is increasing, and the people diagnosed will be interacting with a variety of agencies in order to receive support services. Initial services will be from health service providers, but there will be a shift from health service providers to schools. At schools special education services then take more control of support services. Once at school, service providers collaborate to make sure the student is receiving appropriate supports and accommodations as laid out in the Individuals with disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These service providers are parts of networks and



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partnerships of public and private organizations that all serve to help local education agencies (LEAs) meet the needs of students. These networks are referred to here as policy networks.

Population and Sample

The researchers selected three Virginia areas, Charlottesville, Richmond, and Roanoke, to study based on differing population sizes. The population differences between the three areas would result in differences in the size of the potential pool of organizations and stakeholders involved in the policy network.

Overview of Methods

The initial respondent recruitment list was built through internet searches of education agencies, secondly autism groups and service providers were included, then nearby autism programs at universities, and lastly the department of education and Aging and Rehabilitative Services. This resulted in recruitment lists of 32 potential survey participants for Charlottesville, 58 for Richmond, and 53 for Roanoke. These respondents completed the 17 question online survey which lasted 15-20 minutes for which they received a small payment.

- The first third of the survey asked some background questions about the respondent including questions about their work within the organization and their experience with autism.
- They used the hybrid name generator network survey, wherein they are prompted then given general examples, to inquire about the stakeholders that the respondent had contact with.
- Respondents were then asked which stakeholders provided informational supports and which provided monetary supports.
- Lastly, respondents were asked then asked about the state of collaboration about autism, including any roadblocks and their recommendations.

The survey results were examined using social network analysis.

Variables or Broad Topics

- Population size
 - number of school districts
 - per pupil spending
 - fiscal capacity
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- population of students on the spectrum

Findings/Results

1. The first hypothesis was upheld as there was a cross section of many organizations that contributed to supporting students with autism. These organizations included “nonprofit organizations, LEAs (, state government agencies, and research organizations.”
 - The actors with the greatest involvement were nonprofits in Charlottesville and Roanoke, and government agencies in Richmond. That shows that areas that have a heavier presence of government organizations, like Richmond the capital, are likely to have more governmental support.
2. The second hypothesis was upheld as networks looked to the organizations with the most expertise. LEAs were responsible for much of this action in the context of information sharing; the department of education’s training centers for teachers and other faculty were very frequently accessed.
3. The third hypothesis received support and suggested that “policy networks are indeed quite open and sparse, with very few organizations sharing sets of mutual partners.”
4. The structures of the information and financial sharing networks appear very different, with the state government providing most of the financial support.
5. The last hypothesis was also upheld, which conflicts with the prior research. Intermediary nonprofits were the center of the support networks; they funneled information and resources out to the other organizations.
6. Include a cross section of organizations from a number of policy systems
7. Ex: education, health, social services
8. Network participants are driven by a need for information from autism experts in the community
9. Characteristics of low density structure with “bridging ties” that connect different actors across the network
10. Small set of nongovernmental organizations exogenous to LEAs function as “bridges” that funnel information from diverse sources

Implications

- A large portion of the supports are provided by nongovernmental agencies, which cause problems for accountability as they don’t necessarily follow the same guidelines or standards that governmental agencies are bound by.
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- There are many organizations involved in this network, but most are not central for the networks, they work more in the periphery.
- “Measuring collaborative efforts in local policy networks of LEAs, nonprofit organizations, and other community stakeholders may provide a valuable scholarly lens through which we can understand state and local capacity to address new and uncertain implementation challenges.”
 - Through this data and other similar research on autism agencies we will better understand how to adapt to problems and difficulties that arise within these networks.
- This study gave a glimpse of how organizations work together to combat a common issue, which is increasingly important to understand as the prevalence of autism grows.

CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS

Conceptual

The study focused on organizations that shared information or money, but that is not totally inclusive of all autism service providers. They could have included other types of organizations like support groups, therapists, and other organizations that are about community or provided services.

Data

- The scope of the research is limited because the data was only gathered from those three areas in Virginia, which limits generalizability.
- Some key network players were left out of the study due to a lack of the author’s knowledge, which could be improved through better communication in autism networks.

Analysis

As this study was conducted through survey, there is a certain amount of error likely since it is all self-report data. Objective data, such as the number of emails or phone calls between organizations, would have less bias than self-report data.

Interpretation

The interpretation of results may be an overestimation as the author only included a limited selection of agencies. The omission of other agencies may have resulted in different results.



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Application

- Outcome data, such as how many people are effectively helped or how many make it through the program, was not taken, so we know what organizations are active, but not necessarily which are effective.
- This data was only for K-12 students and does not necessarily to college students or other adults.

FOLLOW-UP

Little Questions

What were the methods for collaboration between these organizations?

Big Questions

- Are the governmental or private organizations more effective?
- What type of organization is more effective as the “center” of the network?

Next Steps

The researchers proposed several new directions for work; collaboration between organizations that share similar identities and values, perceived risks may influence network formation, and ways for organizations to act without much cost.

- Improve existing measures of state and local government capacity
- Apply broader theoretical or conceptual frameworks to understanding public policy.
- Frequently compare education politics with other policy subsystems

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