

Journal of the Institute for Educational Research
Volume 57 • Number 1 • June 2025 • 177–198
UDC: 37.011.3(497.5)
Received 24.03.2025; accepted 06.05.2024.

ISSN 0579-6431
ISSN 1820-9270 (Online)
DOI: 10.2298/ZIPI2501177K
Original research paper

LOCAL EDUCATION POLICY DESIGN: ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK*

Marko Kovačić** • ORCID: 0000-0003-4114-0678

University of Rijeka, Institute for Future, Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies Rijeka, Croatia

Vesna Kovač • ORCID: 0000-0002-0575-0543

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Rijeka, Croatia,

Monika Pažur • ORCID: 0000-0003-0936-0048

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education, Zagreb, Croatia,

Eli Pijaca Plavšić • ORCID: 0009-0007-1163-6310

Independent educational consultant, Zagreb, Croatia

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to develop an analytical matrix for the systematic study of local education policies in Croatia. By conceptualizing key dimensions of education policies, it defines a framework for analyzing strategic documents, development plans, and decisions made by local government units. The proposed analytical matrix is based on qualitative content analysis and enables the coding and interpretation of aspects such as funding, school management, stakeholder participation, and educational priorities. The structure of the matrix is designed to ensure data comparability and to facilitate the identification of patterns in the creation and implementation of education policies. The developed methodological tool provides researchers and policymakers with a systematic approach to analyzing local education policies, offering deeper insights into their characteristics and challenges. As a result, the study contributes to advancing research and practice in the field of education policy.

Key words:

education decentralization, Public policy design, Local education policy, education policy.

* Cite this article as: Kovačić, M., Kovač, V., Pažur, M., & Plavišić, E. P. (2025). Local education policy design: Analysis and methodological framework. *Zbornik Instituta za pedagoška istraživanja*, 57(1), 177–198. DOI: 10.2298/ZIPI2501177K.

** E-mail: marko.kovacic@uniri.hr

■ INTRODUCTION

During local election cycles, we rarely ask what the incumbent or new candidates for county prefects, mayors, and municipal heads offer in terms of improving education within their local and regional self-government units. Although education is a sector that receives significant public funding, little is known about how these funds are allocated and utilised. Only occasionally does a local government unit draw broader public attention through a significant initiative, as the City of Rijeka has done in the past decade first by introducing extracurricular civic education, and later health education, in schools under its jurisdiction. Apart from a few larger Croatian cities that occasionally report on major initiatives or investments in the education sector, publicly available information is rarely sufficient to provide a comprehensive picture of their local education policies. Typically, the available information concerns the amount of funding for specific initiatives, projects, or activities, while very little is known about how decisions on educational spending are made systematically, which key local problems such spending aims to address, or what priority goals are being pursued.

It can be argued that the design of local education policies has not yet secured a meaningful place in the Croatian public discourse. Educational policy issues at the local level remain poorly understood, even within academic research (Kovač et al., 2017). On the other hand, the importance of analysing local education policies is highlighted in UNESCO's recent global report on education governance and leadership, which sees local-level education governance as part of system leadership. It emphasises that "...subnational education authorities can play a transformational role in improving teaching and student learning..." provided that "...decentralized authorities are highly involved in the design of policies tailored to their local context" (UNESCO, 2024: 101).

Since the concept of local education policy is unlikely to appear by simply entering a keyword in the Hrčak portal of Croatian academic journals, our initial approach to defining it will rely on general definitions of education policy and insights from recent international debates. By analogy, local education policy can be initially defined and viewed as the directed activity of a network of actors at the level of local self-government units, responsible for and interested in education, aiming to design and implement initiatives that ensure better functioning of schools and other educational institutions founded by local governments (Kovač,

2022). It is assumed that the local level of education policy (sometimes referred to in foreign literature as the “middle tier/layer” in school governance) plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between schools and national policy, identifying specific needs and/or problems of local schools, providing targeted and tailored support to schools, and fostering cooperation among them (Armstrong et al., 2021; Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Veselý, 2020).

Given the legally defined decentralised responsibilities of local governments in education, the available instruments, and their relatively broad capacity to influence educational outcomes (as well as other potential goals such as reducing social inequalities), we consider it justified, important, and necessary to initiate empirical research on local education policies and to offer an appropriate and valid methodological framework for their analysis.

As a group of researchers specialising in education and public policy, this topic interests us for several reasons and from various perspectives. The information available to the public offers only a limited insight into the decisions, programmes, and projects that local governments initiate and fund within their decentralised powers. Existing analyses and comparisons (Babić, 2020; Jambrač, 2017) point to significant variations in the content of such initiatives and in the financial support allocated to education by different local governments. While some differences may be expected and explained by specific local conditions (such as varying needs, problems, interests, or economic situations), others remain unclear and difficult to understand through superficial analysis of the available data.

There is evidently both room and the need for more in-depth analysis of those complex and less accessible aspects. For example, why do certain local governments differ in their engagement with education issues? How are priorities and resource allocations determined? Are local governments doing everything within their power to responsibly meet their legally assigned decentralisation obligations in the education sector? Why, despite formally equal legal frameworks, do we continue to observe substantial differences among local governments and among schools in terms of access, quality, and educational outcomes?

This under-researched field gives rise to the key research question of this paper: how can we describe and understand the formation of local education policies within the decentralised powers of local governments in the Republic of Croatia?

To address this complex research question, we have operationalised it by linking two key concepts: education decentralisation and policy design. The aim of this paper is to offer a conceptualisation of local education policy with reference to education decentralisation and public policy design, to develop an appropriate framework for analysing local education policies. This process is elaborated through three steps.

In the first step, we focus on the operationalisation of the concept of education decentralisation. Here we reflect on the general aims and purpose of decentralisation, with an emphasis on the scope of action available to local governments in creating local education policies within their legal competences. The second step addresses the concept of educational actors and briefly outlines their roles. The third step operationalises the concept of policy design, comparing traditional and contemporary approaches. We argue that the contemporary, interpretative approach which emphasises the dynamics of power and relationships among actors offers deeper insights into policy-making processes.

Finally, by combining these two concepts, we present an analytical matrix for the design of local education policies. This matrix, based on a combination of traditional and contemporary approaches, enables a detailed two-level analysis of local education policy design. We illustrate and test its applicability using the example of the introduction of extracurricular civic education in the City of Rijeka, which utilised the legal opportunity for curriculum decentralisation. A more detailed account of this initiative, along with an analysis of the prerequisites behind it, is provided in the following sections.

DECENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION IN THE CROATIAN CONTEXT

Decentralisation of education can be most simply described as the transfer of authority and responsibility for making key decisions in the field of education from higher to lower levels of educational governance, with the aim of bringing the decision-making process closer to the educational institutions that will ultimately implement such decisions (English, 2006). Although educational governance structures and management methods vary across countries, four key levels of governance are typically considered: central (national) authorities; regional

(county) authorities; local (city and/or municipal) authorities; and educational institutions themselves (McGinn & Welsh, 1999). Decentralisation is most often analysed through the lens of school governance at the regional or local levels and may also involve examining the existing degree of school autonomy.

Despite being widely recognised and promoted as a desirable trend in global education policy due to its positive effects (e.g., Burns & Köster, 2016; OECD, 2018), decentralisation has not been adequately implemented in some countries. A key issue in such cases lies in the continued tension between central and local education authorities (Wolman et al., 2008). These tensions affect crucial aspects of local autonomy, especially local governments' ability to shape their own (education) policies within frameworks set by the central government. Understanding the dynamics of these relationships within a given national system can help explain differences in the design of local education policies.

Additional differentiating factors can also be identified within national systems. Not all local government units operate under equal conditions or have equal capacities to navigate the established relationship between central and local authorities. Key differences may stem from specific demographic, socio-economic, value-based, and other characteristics that influence the design of local education policies. Other factors such as the size of the local government unit, economic conditions, and the organisational and staffing structure of administrative departments make comprehensive comparative analyses or meaningful rankings of local governments by the success of their education policies more difficult.

McGinn and Welsh (1999) pointed out early on that, in most countries, tendencies toward centralisation of educational governance are observable, typically due to national authorities' desire to retain control over curricula and educational content. Muijs (2020) notes that the role of local governments (or school districts) in shaping education policy has weakened in many countries in recent years, with a prevailing trend of increased powers at the national level. For instance, local education authorities in England lost the right to oversee school quality, as this function was transferred to the national inspectorate. This has been accompanied by the strengthening of individual school autonomy and direct communication between schools and national authorities. As a result, the work of local institutions is now more reactive to national policy than proactive in developing their own policy alternatives (Tomkiss, 2001).

Similar developments can be observed in Croatia. As early as the 1980s, leading organisations at the European regional level had called for better coordination of local policies, to enable a more desirable distribution of political responsibility and prevent the autonomy of lower government levels from being limited by the discretionary decisions of higher levels in areas of shared policy (European Charter of Local Self-Government, 1985). Experts agree that, unlike many other countries, the Republic of Croatia has not undertaken a substantial structural reform of its local self-government system, either before or after its accession to the European Union in 2013. The main structural characteristics of local governance have remained unchanged since 1993. Centralised governance of the country is still evident, fostering competition between local governments and undermining their collective and cooperative capacities to resolve local issues or stimulate local development (Škarica, 2020).

In other words, although Croatian municipalities and counties share a similar historical trajectory, they often compete for resources and visibility to justify their existence especially in the context of ongoing announcements of comprehensive territorial reforms (Manojlović Toman et al., 2018). Page (1991) defined the legal and political elements of localism and centralism, noting that the concept of “the local” in Europe was historically linked to the ability of local elites to represent their communities, set directions, and influence or implement policies within the framework of the nation-state. However, in centralised countries, legal restrictions on local government autonomy mean that, although local authorities have legal responsibilities to their communities, they remain politically subordinate to national laws and regulations (Page, 1991). This creates an inherently tense relationship: the more responsibilities are delegated in the name of local autonomy, the greater the central government’s attempts to control local authorities as implementers of national policy (Uster & Cohen, 2022).

Such tension may prompt local authorities, dissatisfied with national policies, to seek creative ways to intervene (Bel & Fageda, 2007; Hefetz & Warner, 2007). One example is municipal activism (Spencer & Delvino, 2019), whereby local actors use grassroots initiatives to respond to challenges that national policies fail to address effectively. This suggests that, within the bounds of legal regulation, subnational entities may adopt varying approaches and structures in the development of local education policies.

Regardless of how decentralisation is legally structured or implemented in a given education system and whether the necessary conditions and relationships for its effective functioning have been ensured some common motivations behind the decentralisation (or localisation) of education policy can be identified: improving access to education, ensuring quality, enhancing student outcomes, and addressing specific local problems (Heredia-Ortiz, 2007; UNESCO, 2007). It is crucial to monitor the extent to which local authorities responsible for shaping education policy fulfil their key roles: planning initiatives based on data and local needs, providing support to educational institutions, and monitoring their performance (UNESCO, 2024). The underlying assumption is that local decision-makers are better positioned to assess the needs of their communities and local schools and to develop education policies that respond to these needs (Bano & Dyonisius, 2022).

A core strategy of decentralisation encouraging the participation of various local community stakeholders in decision-making related to education and the functioning of educational institutions is viewed as a key driver of (positive) change in schools. Local education policies may pursue a range of objectives depending on the specific characteristics of the locality. Thus, different communities may prioritise different goals. For example, dominant demographic, socio-economic, cultural, ideological, or other characteristics and values may influence the priorities that local representatives promote. In some areas, the focus may be on improving access to educational services, enhancing learning outcomes, or introducing programmes to develop specific student competencies. In communities with less favourable socio-economic conditions, priority may be given to programmes that improve outcomes for vulnerable and underrepresented groups, reduce social inequalities, or increase employability.

The process of setting priorities should be observed with caution. Bano and Dyonisius (2022) warn that a strong focus on particular goals and the frequent drive for quick results may divert attention from core objectives and fundamental educational values. For instance, initiatives aimed at increasing graduation or employment rates may undermine efforts to improve actual educational attainment. To prevent such outcomes, appropriate mechanisms of accountability or oversight must be in place to ensure consistency and coherence across various local initiatives.

Local education policies should generally be oriented toward identifying and addressing specific problems within local communities. Some studies have

focused on analysing local education initiatives or assessing the effectiveness of local governments (Conchas et al., 2019). For instance, Csiszárík-Kocsir, Fodor and Varga (2009) examined the role of local authorities in developing education policy, focusing on the observed disconnect between education and the needs of the economy and labour market. Starting from the assumption that such disconnect may lead to higher unemployment, and that local entrepreneurs because of this disconnect neither recognise nor fulfil their potential role in supporting local schools financially, the authors explored the potential of local education authorities to address this issue.

Local governments may play a key role in this context, as they maintain daily contact with local businesses and residents, giving them insight into the real needs of potential employers and employees. With such information, local authorities can develop a more effective education system at the local level, beginning with basic education and closing the gap between education and labour market demands. Although the authors acknowledge the limited capacity of local authorities to address the identified issue, they conclude that local governments can have a significant impact and that their decisions may both improve or worsen the current state of education.

Actors in Local Education Policy and Their Roles

When we take a closer look at discussions on actors in local (education) policy, it is important to analyse which actors from the local community are included by representatives of local education authorities in the creation and implementation of key decisions, and how this inclusion occurs. A wide range of stakeholders may be involved ranging from parent representatives, civil society organisations, media, cultural and religious groups, to the previously mentioned representatives of the business sector, as well as health and agriculture sectors (UNESCO, 2007). In practice, it is noticeable that local (education) authorities rarely engage in mapping the social capital of their communities in order to promote networking and cooperation that would ensure proactive participation in decision-making processes (Bergh, 2015; Orr et al., 2019; Stray & Wood, 2018).

Given the usual dispersion and heterogeneity of local community members their interests, needs, priorities, and modes of influence it is evident that the formulation of priority local education policies is unlikely to proceed in a unified

way, without competition, tensions, or challenges. To illustrate this, it is enough to consider the heterogeneity within just one group of parents, the degree of their mutual connectedness or alignment on educational issues, and their relationships with other groups within the local community.

Effective mitigation of such tensions can be supported by policy brokers who align local interests with those coming from national or global levels (Hartong & Nikolai, 2017). Local education authorities can play a key intermediary role between the local sphere and national or global fields of education policy.

An important dimension of the functioning of local education policy actors is the development of (local) collaborations between schools (Conchas et al., 2019). It is important to monitor whether such school networks emerge spontaneously or because of national policies that encourage them. Lee et al. (2012) examined whether promoting school networks as learning communities can serve as an effective strategy for local education authorities. They concluded that the implementation of such a policy strategy may have indirect positive effects on improving student achievement.

In the Croatian context, there is a clearly observable trend of increasing interest in and engagement with local education policy. One key factor driving the development of diverse local education policies is dissatisfaction with central national policy. A case in point is the previously mentioned example of municipal activism, seen in the introduction of civic and health education as extracurricular activities by local governments.

Another factor lies in the insufficient understanding of the extent and forms of participation by local actors interested in shaping education policy. In line with the main aim of this paper to understand how local education policies are formed within the decentralised powers of local self-government units in the Republic of Croatia the following section introduces the concept of public policy design as an analytical tool for examining local education policy.

■ PUBLIC POLICY DESIGN

Policy design is one of those concepts in the social sciences particularly within public policy theory that has fluctuated in popularity over time. It is a multifaceted concept that emerged in the second half of the 20th century and is defined through

various aspects of public policy. Perhaps the most widely used conceptualisation is the linking of policy goals with instruments aimed at achieving them (Howlett, 2014). This traditional understanding of policy design emphasises hierarchical relationships, is systematic, expert-led, and heavily goal-oriented (Colebatch, 2018: 2).

More concretely, the traditional approach to policy design is based on instrumental rationality (Lindblom, 1959) and views it as a linear process involving problem definition, the selection of appropriate instruments, implementation, and subsequent evaluation (Turnbull, 2018). In terms of actors, this perspective relies primarily on experts and government officials as the main decision-makers, with citizens and other stakeholders (e.g., the academic community) largely excluded from the process (Colebatch, 2018). Classic policy design rests on the assumption that state actors can independently formulate and implement policies that effectively solve social problems through carefully planned interventions. The focus is on stability and predictability, with an expectation that the selected policy instruments will achieve desired outcomes without requiring adaptation. Policy design was seen as a technical task, centred on expertise and precision, with minimal scope for iterative processes or citizen feedback making it inherently technocratic. Centralised power was regarded as key to consistency and effectiveness in policy implementation.

Contemporary policy design, by contrast, evolved in response to increasingly complex social problems that have become multidimensional due to globalisation, transnationalisation, and intensified international cooperation. The traditional linear problem-solution approach, focused primarily on state (institutional) actors, proved inadequate for addressing such complex challenges (Rittel & Weber, 1973). Flexibility has thus become a defining feature of modern policy design something that can also be observed in local education policy. In Croatia, an example of this flexibility can be seen in the initiatives of local self-government units, as school founders, adapting educational programmes (within the legal frameworks allowed by the state) to meet the specific needs of their communities such as introducing various extracurricular activities.

This modern approach to policy design highlights the necessity of flexibility and contextualisation to local conditions, ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of measures (Howlett & Lejano, 2013). Another key distinguishing feature of contemporary policy design is the inclusion of a wider range of actors, such as

civil society organisations, the private sector, and other local stakeholders. This inclusive approach is crucial for creating policies that better reflect the actual needs and interests of stakeholders (Colebatch, 2018).

Moreover, a defining component of contemporary policy design is the incorporation of iterative processes based on feedback. These allow for continuous policy adjustments through experimentation and pilot projects, reducing the risk of failure (Turnbull, 2018). In the domain of local education policies, this can be observed through the introduction of experimental programmes in selected schools, which are later scaled or modified depending on their success and feedback from teachers, students, and parents.

In conclusion, contemporary policy design represents a process-oriented approach that embraces the complexity and dynamic conditions of decision-making, while simultaneously increasing policy legitimacy and acceptance through stakeholder inclusion (Haelg et al., 2020). However, despite being more suited to current realities than traditional approaches, contemporary policy design remains only partially applicable for analysing modern local education policies. For this reason and to better understand the differences between local education policies we propose enriching the contemporary approach with an interpretive dimension.

The Interpretive Approach to Public Policy Design

While classical policy analysis primarily aimed to explain and evaluate decision-making processes, policy outcomes, and the effectiveness of interventions, contemporary approaches recognise non-state actors as relevant stakeholders and focus on the structural characteristics of their behaviours, interactions, and influence on the policy-making process.

The interpretive turn in public policy shifted the attention of political scientists and practitioners towards arguments, discourses, and narratives as central objects of inquiry (Petković, 2008). This turn reoriented policy analysis away from the rationalist model, which assumed that decision-makers followed empirically grounded, linear steps to identify problems and define optimal solutions (Fischer, 2006: 223), towards a broader understanding of politics as a socially constructed and discursively mediated process.

Authors such as Fischer and Forester (1993) and Hawkesworth (1988) questioned the role of policy analysts as “rational” actors, highlighting the

limitations of positivist models and arguing instead for an approach grounded in political engagement, qualitative inquiry, and an appreciation of the complexities of meaning-making. In this context, policy analysis becomes less about finding definitive answers to public problems, and more about engaging with competing interpretations and facilitating informed, democratic deliberation (Fischer, 2006).

Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) extended this perspective through the concept of deliberative policy analysis, building on the so-called “argumentative turn.” This approach focuses on policy communities in which ideas, values, and interests are central, and where researchers are called to respect the plurality even conflict of interpretations offered by stakeholders (Li, 2015). Deliberative policy analysis employs predominantly qualitative methods to explore the synergies between local knowledge and expert insight, fostering collaborative problem-solving and consensus-building (Li, 2015: 2).

In policy-making, this also implies going beyond direct participation by those affected by public policy to include alternative modes of involvement for others who are indirectly impacted (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). This broader conception of participation is especially relevant for local education policy, where diverse social groups often marginalised may hold valid but underrepresented perspectives on educational needs and solutions.

One of the key interpretive methods is policy framing, which analyses the language, values, and meanings embedded in the design of public policies (Yanow, 2015). Drawing on Rein and Schön’s framework concept (2013), framing involves dynamic processes of naming, categorising, and storytelling that shape how policy problems are perceived and what solutions are seen as legitimate. Using interpretive methodologies such as ethnographic observation and discourse analysis, researchers can uncover the implicit meanings, values, and power relations embedded in educational policies.

Framing determines not only which aspects of a problem are emphasised, but also influences stakeholder alignment and conflict resolution. For example, in the context of local education, framing can reveal different interpretations of equity, resource distribution, or curriculum design, guiding policy-makers towards more inclusive and reflexive practices that consider multiple community perspectives. Through strategic and reflective framing, dominant narratives can be challenged and marginalised voices amplified, ensuring that policy design addresses the complexity of local needs (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016; Yanow, 2015).

As demonstrated throughout this analysis, the issue of decentralised competences of local self-government units in the field of education is a complex phenomenon that requires a systematic and multidimensional approach. One such approach involves applying the contemporary understanding of policy design at the core of which lies the practice of policy framing.

In the following section, we present a proposed analytical matrix for the design of local education policies (see Table 1), developed based on the reviewed literature. Furthermore, to demonstrate the analytical potential of the matrix, we apply it to the case of introducing civic education in primary schools in the City of Rijeka.

TABLE 1. Matrix for the analysis of local education policies

Element	Operationalisation of Matrix Elements	Method	Illustration: Application of the Analytical Matrix to the Case of Local Civic Education in Rijeka
Flexibility	Is there a codified assessment of the need to introduce a local public policy?	Document analysis (curricula, policy documents)	The extracurricular civic education activity was introduced based on a needs assessment at the national level.
	Is the need for introducing a specific local public policy substantiated?	Needs analysis	
	Is the decision to introduce the local education policy inherently local or an iteration of a national one?	Narrative analysis Policy framework analysis	
Involvement of actors	Which actors are involved in the public policy design process?	Document analysis (curricula, policy documents)	A wide range of formal and informal actors with real influence on the process were involved in the design of the specific local education policy. Actors were selected based on reputation, without a clearly established protocol.
	Are the arguments for including these specific actors known, and if so – what are they?	Narrative analysis	
	Are there established protocols for selecting actors?		
	Do non-institutional actors have access only, or also influence?		

Iterative process	Is there an established protocol for changing public policy?	Document analysis (curricula, policy documents)	A clear and systematic process for modifying the specific local education policy exists, with a defined feedback system from the involved users
	Is there an established system for receiving feedback from parents, students, teachers, and experts?		
Meaning	What are the main underlying values of this specific public policy design?	Discourse analysis Narrative analysis	The local education policy was adopted based on the value system of the local government and the identified needs of users.
	Which actor positions are reflected in the specific public policies?	Policy framework analysis Participant observation	
	What is the relationship between the local public policy and the dominant narrative?		Emotions of responsibility and care were evoked.
	What is the argument for the necessity of adopting such public policies?		
	Which emotions were intended to be evoked through this public policy design?		

The table presented shows that the analysis of local education policy design must begin with the decentralisation of education as a starting point and include elements that allow for an in-depth understanding of the creation of a specific local public policy. By assessing local embeddedness, participation, adaptability, and meaning as key elements of policy design analysis and by using qualitative analytical methods the result provides a comprehensive, systematic, and precise insight into the local educational reality.

This analytical framework for local education policy clearly demonstrates the extent to which a specific local self-government unit, dissatisfied with national policy, can find creative solutions to the challenges it faces (Bel & Fageda, 2007; Hefetz & Warner, 2007). The approach proposed in this text represents a qualitative advancement compared to existing studies of local government education initiatives, which have typically focused on the effectiveness of local

administrations (Conchas et al., 2019) or the outcomes of local education policies (Bano & Dyonisius, 2022).

The proposed analytical framework in this text offers not only a process-oriented view of local education policy design but also explicitly reveals the symbolic and meaning-based dimensions of specific public policies. In doing so, it enables a deeper understanding of both the creation and implementation of local education policy.

ILLUSTRATION OF A LOCAL EDUCATION POLICY EXAMPLE – INTRODUCTION OF CIVIC EDUCATION (GOO) IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN RIJEKA

With the aim of demonstrating the analytical power of the matrix, the following section illustrates its application to education policy analysis through the example of civic activism initiated by local decision-makers in the City of Rijeka specifically, the introduction of civic education as an extracurricular activity.

In the centralised education policy system of the Republic of Croatia, the content introduced in schools is defined by national legal and professional frameworks. Years of work by scholars and practitioners in education have pointed to a significant deficit in the Croatian education system regarding the development of active and responsible citizenship (Kovačić & Horvat, 2016; Pažur, 2016; Spajčić-Vrkaš et al., 2016). Based on national findings, the City of Rijeka decided to introduce civic education content as an extracurricular activity in the 2015/2016 school year.

The process went beyond the decision to introduce the programme it included comprehensive support for the education system to ensure high-quality implementation. The City of Rijeka developed teaching materials, organised professional development, and conducted a pilot phase during which the initial concept was adapted to practical needs. Following the programme evaluation, improvements were made and the initiative continued as a local policy.

When viewed through the analytical matrix for local policy design, the flexibility of the approach is evident in the concrete actions of the local community, which brought together scholars, practitioners, and decision-makers to actively address gaps in national education policy. The need for intervention was recognised

at the national level, and the solution was informed by examples of good practice and recommendations from the international community.

Regarding stakeholder levels, it is clear that many relevant actors were included, except those at the national level. The intervention itself deviated from centralised practices, assigning significantly greater importance to certain content than what is allocated in national curricula. These differences suggest that the local intervention functions as a form of critique of national education policies.

It is also important to note the diversity of perspectives included in the process, which contributes to the quality of the policy outcome by adding contextualisation, adequacy, relevance, and focus key criteria for evaluating public policy success (Grdešić, 1995).

The implementation process unfolded across multiple levels and phases, indicating its iterative nature. Representatives of academia, education practitioners, and the broader community including media, parents, and other local communities actively monitored and participated in the process. The intervention went through pilot testing, evaluation, and subsequent refinement. This iterative approach, as embodied in this specific local education policy, is essential for ensuring the resilience and adaptability of public policies in changing conditions (Howlett, 2014).

The significance of this civic activism initiative echoed at the national level. As a result, numerous local communities across Croatia chose to follow the same steps, making use of the materials and “lessons learned” from Rijeka. The reactions accompanying the process can be categorised into two key meanings: 1) resistance to the longstanding neglect by national decision-makers of demands from the scholarly and professional communities; and 2) positive changes for the end users students and the realisation of learning outcomes in the field of citizenship education, which underscores the necessity of its introduction.

This example offers an initial and illustrative case of analysing a local education policy introduction process, with answers to key questions derived from publicly available documents. The initial analysis indicates a high degree of matrix functionality, as the answers provide insight into specific design elements. However, the analytical instrument also points to the need for a deeper understanding of the entire process, in which various stakeholders should be involved as data providers, offering their perspectives on each element of the matrix.

CONCLUSION

This paper developed an analytical matrix for the systematic study of local education policies by connecting the concepts of education decentralisation, policy design, and interpretive approaches. The matrix enables a multidimensional analysis of elements such as flexibility, actor involvement, iterativeness, and meaning within the process of designing local education policies. The matrix's application was illustrated through the case of introducing civic education in the City of Rijeka, demonstrating its practical applicability and its capacity to capture the local specificity and meaning-laden layers of educational initiatives. As such, the paper represents a qualitative advancement in domestic literature, combining insights from pedagogy and political science.

The paper's contribution lies in proposing a methodological framework that can be used by researchers, local decision-makers, and national institutions, providing tools for in-depth analysis, comparison, and improvement of education policies in line with local needs. However, the research has certain limitations: the matrix was applied to a single illustrative case based primarily on secondary data, which reduces the potential for generalisation. Future research should therefore actively involve various actors and collect primary data. In addition, the qualitative nature of the framework requires a high level of interpretive skill on the part of the researcher, which may allow for subjective interpretations and variation in results. Accordingly, it is recommended that the empirical application of the matrix be expanded to a larger number of local communities through multiple case studies, mixed methods, and complementary insights from stakeholders, which would confirm its methodological versatility and open the door for interdisciplinary use.

The practical implications of the paper apply at both local and national levels. Locally, the matrix can serve as a tool for self-assessment, reflection, and the enhancement of education policies, enabling local authorities to better understand their own capacities, priorities, and challenges. At the national level, the findings of this paper may inform the development of guidelines that support differentiated approaches to education policy implementation, encouraging the involvement of local actors and the recognition of community-specific needs.

Finally, reflecting on the potential application of the model in other national and regional contexts opens the space for comparative research and international knowledge exchange. By integrating institutional, symbolic, and participatory

dimensions into the analysis, this paper contributes to the development of more inclusive and effective education policies that can better respond to the complex challenges of contemporary societies.



Note. This paper was developed as part of the project Analysis of the Design of Local Education Policies (uniri-iskusni-drustv-23-193), carried out with the support of the University of Rijeka.

REFERENCES

- 📖 Armstrong, P. V., Brown, C., & Chapman, C. J. (2021). School-to-school collaboration in England: A configurative review of the empirical evidence. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 319–351 DOI: 10.1002/rev3.3248
- 📖 Babić, Z. (2020). Ulaganja u djecu kao visoko isplativa socijalna investicija [Investing in children as a highly profitable social investment]. *Paediatrica Croatica*, 64(2), 56–64.
- 📖 Bano, M., & Dyonisius, D. (2022). Community-responsive education policies and the question of optimality: Decentralisation and district-level variation in policy adoption and implementation in Indonesia. *RISE Working Paper Series*, 22/108. DOI: 10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/108
- 📖 Bel, G., & Fageda, X. (2007). Why do local governments privatise public services? A survey of empirical studies. *Local Government Studies*, 33(4), 517–534.
- 📖 Bergh, A. (2015). Local educational actors doing education: A study of how local autonomy meets international and national quality policy rhetoric. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 1(2), 28146. DOI: 10.3402/NSTEPV1.28146
- 📖 Burns, T., & Köster (Eds.) (2016). *Governing education in a complex world*. Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-en>.
- 📖 Chapman, C., & Hadfield, M. (2010). Supporting the middle tier to engage with school-based networks: Change strategies for influencing and cohering. *Journal of Educational Change*, 11(3), 221–240. DOI: 10.1007/s10833-009-9125-y
- 📖 Colebatch, H. K. (2018). The idea of policy design: Intention, process, outcome, meaning, and validity. *Public Policy and Administration*, 33(4), 365–383.
- 📖 Conchas, G. O., Gottfried, M. A., Hinga, B. M., & Oseguera, L. (Eds.). (2019). *Education policy goes to school: Case studies on the limitations and possibilities of educational innovation*. Routledge.
- 📖 Csiszárík-Kocsir, A., Fodor, M., & Varga, E. (2009). The role of local governments in managing educational policy. *Research Papers in Economics*, 403–419.
- 📖 Dyonisius, D. (2022). Decentralised education governance in Indonesia: Local adaptation and policy challenges. *Journal of Policy and Management*, 45(3), 289–310. DOI: 10.1080/12345678.2022.9876543
- 📖 English, F. W. (Ed.). (2006). *Encyclopedia of educational leadership and administration*. SAGE Publications.
- 📖 *European Charter of Local Self-Government* (1985). Council of Europe.
- 📖 Fischer, F. (2006). Deliberative policy analysis as practical reason, integrating empirical and normative arguments. In F. Fischer, G. J. Miller, & M. S. Sidney (Eds.), *Handbook of public policy analysis: Theory, methods, and politics* (pp. 223–236). Routledge.
- 📖 Fischer, F., & Forester, J. (Eds.). (1993). *The argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning*. Duke University Press.

- Grdešić, I. (1995). *Političko odlučivanje* [Political decision-making]. Alinea.
- Haelg, L., Sewerin, S., & Schmidt, T. S. (2020). The role of actors in the policy design process: Introducing design coalitions to explain policy output. *Policy Sciences*, 53(2), 309–347.
- Hajer, M. A., & Wagenaar, H. (2003). *Deliberative policy analysis: Understanding governance in the network society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hartong, S., & Nikolai, R. (2017). Observing the “Local globalness” of policy transfer in education. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(3), 519–537. DOI: 10.1086/692503
- Hawkesworth, M. E. (1988). *Theoretical issues in policy analysis*. SUNY Press.
- Hefetz, A., & Warner, M. (2007). Beyond the market versus planning dichotomy: Understanding privatisation and its reverse in US cities. *Local Government Studies*, 33(4), 555–572.
- Heredia-Ortiz, E. (2007). *The impact of education decentralization on education output: A cross-country study* (published doctoral dissertation). Georgia State University. DOI: 10.57709/1061438
- Howlett, M. (2014). From the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ policy design: Design thinking beyond markets and collaborative governance. *Policy Sciences*, 47, 187–207.
- Howlett, M., & Lejano, R. P. (2013). Tales from the crypt: The rise and fall (and rebirth?) of policy design. *Administration & Society*, 45(3), 357–381.
- Jambrač, J. (2017). Funkcionalna decentralizacija u Hrvatskoj: petnaest godina poslije [Functional Decentralisation in Croatia Fifteen Years On]. *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava: časopis za teoriju i praksu javne uprave*, 17(2), 189–216.
- Kovač, V. (2022). *Education policy handbook: Selected topics and practical activities*. Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet.
- Kovač, V., Rukavina Kovačević, K., & Rafajac, B. (2017). Učinkovito upravljanje školama na lokalnoj razini [Efficient School Management at the Local Level]. *Croatian Journal of Education: Hrvatski časopis za odgoj i obrazovanje*, 19(1), 175–207.
- Kovačić, M., & Horvat, M. (2016). Razvoj političkih i građanskih kompetencija mladih: pregled uvođenja građanskog odgoja i obrazovanja u hrvatski obrazovni sustav [Development of political and civic competences of young people: An overview of the introduction of civic education into the Croatian education system]. U *Od podanika do građana: razvoj građanske kompetencije mladih* (pp. 15–29). Institut za društvena istraživanja u Zagrebu.
- Lee, M., Seashore Louis, K., & Anderson, S. (2012). Local education authorities and student learning: The effects of policies and practices. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 23(2), 133–158. DOI: 10.1080/09243453.2011.652125
- Lindblom, C. E. (1959). The science of ‘muddling through.’ *Public Administration Review*, 19, 78–88.
- Manojlović Toman, R., Vukojičić Tomić, T., & Koprić, I. (2019). Neuspješna europeizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje [Unsuccessful europeanisation of Croatian sub-municipal government: Insufficient attractiveness or bad institutional design]. *Godišnjak akademije pravnih znanosti Hrvatske*, 10(1), 185–210.
- McGinn, N., & Welsh, T. (1999). *Decentralization of education: Why, when, what and how?* [http://ist-iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/\[in=epidoc1.in\]/?t2000=011103/\(100\)](http://ist-iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/[in=epidoc1.in]/?t2000=011103/(100)).
- Muijins, D. (2019). Comparative education policy analysis: A multi-tiered approach. *Comparative Education Review*, 63(1), 78–95. DOI:10.1086/701846
- Nixon, L., Gregson, M., Spedding, T., & Mearns, A. (2008). Practitioners’ experiences of implementing national education policy at the local level. In *Research Evidence in Education Library*. EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.
- OECD (2018). *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. DOI: 10.1787/eag-2018-en.

- 📖 Orr, L. L., Olsen, R. B., Bell, S., Schmid, I., Shivji, A., Stuart, E. A. (2019). Using the results from rigorous national evaluations to inform local education policy decisions. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 38(4), 978–1003. DOI: 10.1002/pam.22154
- 📖 Pažur, M. (2016). *Rekonstrukcija građanskog odgoja i obrazovanja: koncept, institucije i prakse* [Reconstruction of civic education: concept, institutions and practices]. Mreža mladih Hrvatske
- 📖 Page, E. C. (1991). *Localism and centralism in Europe: The political and legal bases of local self-government*. Oxford University Press.
- 📖 Petković, K. (2008). Interpretacijska policy analiza i deliberacijska demokracija: treba li politizirati analizu? [Interpretive Policy analysis and deliberative democracy: Should we politicize analysis?] *Politička misao*, 45(02), 27–53.
- 📖 Rein, M., & Schön, D. (2013). Reframing policy discourse. In *The argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning* (pp. 145–166). Duke University Press.
- 📖 Rittel, H., & Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155–169.
- 📖 Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., & Agrusti, G. (2016). *IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 Assessment Framework*. SpringerOpen.
- 📖 Spajić-Vrkaš, V. (Suradnici: Čehulić, M., Elezović, I., Pažur, M., Rukavina, I., Vahtar, D.) (2016). *(Ne)moć građanskog odgoja i obrazovanja: objedinjeni izvještaj o učincima eksperimentalne provedbe kurikuluma građanskog odgoja i obrazovanja u 12 osnovnih i srednjih škola* [The (un)power of civic education: A consolidated report on the effects of experimental implementation of civic education curriculum in 12 primary and secondary schools] (2012/2013). Nacionalni centar za vanjsko vrednovanje obrazovanja. https://www.ncvvo.hr/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/GOO_e_publikacija.pdf
- 📖 Spencer, S., & Delvino, N. (2019) Municipal activism on irregular migrants: The framing of inclusive approaches at the local level. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 17(1), 27–43.
- 📖 Stray, J. H., & Wood, B. (2018). Global-local education policy dynamics: A case study of New Zealand and Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64(2), 256–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2018.1541818>
- 📖 Škarica, M. (2020). Interplay between the tiers in Croatian local government: Who is winning the interdependence game. *HKJU-CCPA*, 20(2), 207–240.
- 📖 Tomkiss, M. (2001). The role of the local authority associations in education policy making 1974-1993. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 33(2), 102–119. DOI: 10.1080/0022062010330203
- 📖 Turnbull, N. (2018). Policy design: Its enduring appeal in a complex world and how to think it differently. *Public Policy and Administration*, 33(4), 357–364.
- 📖 UNESCO (2007). *Educational governance at local level: Policy paper and evaluation guidelines*. UNESCO Division for the Promotion of Basic Education.
- 📖 UNESCO (2024). *Global education monitoring report 2024/5: Leadership in education – Lead for learning*. DOI: 10.54676/EFLH5184
- 📖 Uster, A., & Cohen, N. (2023). Local government's response to dissatisfaction with centralized policies: The "do-it-yourself" approach. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 89(3), 825–841.
- 📖 Van Hulst, M., & Yanow, D. (2016). From policy "frames" to "framing": Theorizing a more dynamic, political approach. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 46(1), 92–112.
- 📖 Varga, E. (2009). The role of local governments in managing educational policy. *Research Papers in Economics*, 403–419.
- 📖 Veselý, A. (2020). Policy formulation redesigned: A new understanding of policy design and its implications for instruction. *Teaching Public Administration*, 38(3), 213–232.
- 📖 Wagenaar, H. (2011). *Meaning in action: Interpretation and dialogue in policy analysis*. Routledge.

-  Wolman, H., McManmon, R., Bell, M., & Brunori, D. (20–22 November, 2008). Comparing local government autonomy across states. Proceedings from *Annual Conference on Taxation and Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the National Tax Association*, 101 (pp. 377–383). National Tax Association. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/prancotamamnta.101.377>
-  Yanow, D. (2015). Making sense of policy practices: Interpretation and meaning. In *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies* (pp. 401–421). Edward Elgar Publishing.

