

Analyzing Book Ban Policy Through Lowi's Policy Typology and Sensemaking Theory

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Abstract

This study examines Florida's 2022 House Bill 1467 (often called the "book ban" policy) and assesses its impacts on K-12 education. It aims to understand how the law's design influences educational access, equity, and resource use, and how stakeholders interpret its mandates. We apply two theoretical frameworks: Lowi's policy typology to classify the bill's type and expected political implications, and sensemaking theory to analyze how educators, librarians, and parents interpret and enact it. Our analysis of legislative documents and expert commentary focuses on the policy's effectiveness, feasibility, equity, cost, and efficiency. Major findings indicate that HB 1467 functions as a regulatory policy imposing extensive review processes. However, these requirements introduce significant administrative burdens. Observers describe the resulting compliance process as "costly and time-consuming," which undermines feasibility and efficiency. The law's broad criteria lead to varied interpretations, highlighting sensemaking challenges. We find that such complexity risks uneven implementation and may restrict student access to diverse materials, raising equity concerns. In conclusion, while the policy aims to increase parental oversight, its design may undermine efficient and equitable implementation. The study suggests clearer guidelines and support are needed to align implementation with educational goals. These findings have broader implications for designing education policies that balance stakeholder input with clarity and fairness.

Keywords: Education Policy, Sensemaking Theory, Regulatory Policy, Censorship, Stakeholder Interpretation

Introduction

Policy is a complex and often ambiguous concept that varies by context. Wheelan (2015) defines policy as a set of deliberate, coordinated decisions by public actors to address collective public concerns. However, policymaking is rarely straightforward. Meltzer and Schwartz (2019) note that policies often result from political compromises, producing outcomes that may not fully reflect any participant's original goals. Fowler (2013) highlights policy as a dynamic process shaped by political values, encompassing formal decisions and

patterns of action or inaction within the political system. In contrast, policy analysis is a structured, evidence-based process for evaluating and recommending solutions to public issues, utilizing various models that each provide distinct analytical strengths (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019, pp. 16–23).

Theoretical frameworks are crucial in policy analysis as they provide structured methods for understanding the complexities of policymaking and outcomes. Weible and Sabatier (2018) emphasize that effective theories should systematically explain policy processes, engage an active research community, allow for comparative analysis across contexts, ensure public accessibility of findings, and evolve through continuous research. These criteria ensure that theoretical frameworks remain robust, adaptable, and capable of effectively producing meaningful insights that inform policy decisions and address public concerns (Anderson, 2010).

This paper aims to analyze Florida's House Bill 1467 (2022), commonly referred to as the Florida Book Ban Policy, using two distinct theoretical lenses: Lowi's Policy Typology and Sensemaking Theory. This policy primarily focuses on enhancing parental rights, increasing transparency, and restricting access to content perceived as inappropriate, reflecting a politically driven effort to align public education with specific social and political values. This policy has sparked debates over censorship, educational freedom, and the politicization of educational content.

Several policy analysis frameworks could be applied, such as Rational Choice Theory, which focuses on cost-benefit decision-making; Bidwell's Resource Allocation Theory, which examines how institutions distribute resources; Berry & Berry's Diffusion Theory, which explains how policies spread across states; Lowi's Typology and Sensemaking Theory were chosen for their ability to capture both the policy's structural design and its interpretive implementation (Spicker, 2006). Lowi's Typology (Lowi, 1972) provides a framework for understanding how HB 1467 distributes power, while Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) offers insight into how stakeholders interpret and respond to policy ambiguity. Studies from Spillane et al. (2018) on sensemaking in education and McDonnell (2013) on educational accountability and policy feedback support the relevance of these frameworks in analyzing education policy.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, theory-based policy analysis, a common approach for deconstructing policy documents and implementation processes (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019). The primary analytical approach involves the application of two complementary theoretical frameworks to the case of Florida's HB 1467: Lowi's Policy Typology (Lowi, 1972) and Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995). The rationale for selecting these two frameworks is that provide distinct yet interconnected lenses. Lowi's typology is used to classify the policy's fundamental design and predict its political dynamics. At the same time,

Sensemaking Theory is employed to examine the on-the-ground interpretive processes of stakeholders during implementation. Using this allows for a comprehensive analysis that covers the policy's structural intent to its lived reality.

To structure the evaluation, this paper applies the policy evaluation criteria, effectiveness, equity, feasibility, cost, and efficiency, outlined by Meltzer and Schwartz (2019) as a consistent metric to assess the policy's outcomes. McDonnell and Elmore's (1987) framework of policy instruments is used to characterize the specific type of policy tool, a mandate, that HB 1467 represents. The analysis is based on a review of the legislative text of HB 1467, government reports from the Florida Department of Education, and secondary sources, including scholarly commentary and news analyses regarding the law's implementation and impact (e.g., Li, 2024; Mosac, 2024).

Lowi's Policy Typology

Theodore J. Lowi's Policy, introduced in 1964, offers a foundational framework for categorizing public policies based on how they distribute benefits and impose burdens among stakeholders. Central to this framework is Lowi's statement that "policy determines politics," emphasizing that the inherent design of a policy directly shapes the political behaviors and processes involved in its formulation and implementation (Lowi, 1964). This typology divides public policies into three categories: distributive, regulatory and redistributive. Distributive policies allocate targeted benefits to specific individuals or groups without significantly disadvantaging others, such as funding for infrastructure projects or educational grants. Regulatory policies establish rules and restrictions to protect public interests, often requiring a balance between competing stakeholder priorities, as exemplified by safety and environmental regulations. Redistributive policies involve reallocating resources between social groups to address inequities, frequently leading to political contention, as seen with welfare and taxation policies. Lowi's framework emphasizes how each policy category inherently produces distinct political dynamics and stakeholder responses, making it a valuable analytical tool for evaluating the political implications of policy decisions (Lowi, 1972; Howlett et al., 1996).

A key strength of Lowi's Policy Typology is its ability to categorize complex policies based on how they distribute benefits and burdens, offering a structured framework for analyzing political behaviors and stakeholder dynamics in education policy. However, the framework's rigidity limits its analytical depth and fails to consider critical social and cultural factors such as equity, identity, and systemic bias, which are essential for comprehensive education policy analysis (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). To overcome these limitations, Lowi's typology should be complemented by interpretive frameworks that capture the broader social impacts of policy implementation.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking Theory, developed by organizational theorist Karl E. Weick (1995), offers a critical framework for understanding how individuals and organizations interpret complex, ambiguous, or uncertain situations. At its core, sensemaking involves the continuous process through which people construct meaning to navigate their environment and inform decision-making. Weick (1995) characterizes this process as retrospective, social, and ongoing, emphasizing that individuals and groups interpret environmental cues, generate plausible explanations, and act based on those interpretations. These interpretations are shaped by personal identities, collective experiences, and organizational contexts, highlighting sensemaking's subjective and dynamic nature.

In the context of policy analysis, sensemaking becomes particularly significant when policies introduce change or disruption, requiring stakeholders to interpret new rules, expectations, and potential consequences (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This framework posits that policies are not implemented based solely on objective facts but are deeply influenced by how stakeholders perceive and interpret them. Several key concepts define how sensemaking operates in the policy environment. Environmental cues, including policy documents, political rhetoric, and media narratives, shape how stakeholders interpret a policy's intent and implications. Identity construction further influences this interpretation, as stakeholders' self-perceptions (e.g., as educators, parents, or policymakers) guide how they engage with the policy. Sensemaking is inherently retrospective, where individuals draw on past experiences to understand and navigate current policy changes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It is also a social process, as stakeholders collectively negotiate and construct shared meanings within communities, organizations, and political groups. Sensemaking prioritizes plausibility over accuracy, focusing on developing actionable interpretations rather than perfectly accurate ones. This action-oriented nature means that how stakeholders interpret a policy directly influences whether they support, resist, or adapt its implementation.

A notable strength of the Sensemaking Theory in education policy analysis is its capacity to uncover how stakeholders interpret and respond to policy changes. This framework is particularly effective in explaining why the same policy can be implemented inconsistently across different school districts, driven by variations in stakeholder perceptions, identities, and local contexts (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It also offers valuable insight into how ambiguity in policy language fosters diverse interpretations, leading to unintended consequences in implementation.

However, the theory is not without limitations. Its focus on subjective interpretation may overlook structural and systemic factors such as institutional constraints, resource disparities, and power dynamics that also shape policy outcomes (McDonnell, 2013). As sensemaking emphasizes interpretive processes over measurable outcomes, it may be less

effective in evaluating a policy's direct effectiveness or cost-efficiency. This limitation suggests that while sensemaking provides deep insights into stakeholder behavior, it should be complemented with frameworks that address structural and political dimensions of policy implementation.

Overview of House Bill 1467

Florida's House Bill 1467 (2022), widely known as the Florida Book Ban Policy, was enacted as part of a broader legislative effort to increase parental involvement in public education and enhance transparency in school curricula and instructional materials. Signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis, the policy mandates that all school districts catalog and review all instructional and library materials, ensuring compliance with state standards. It requires certified media specialists to curate educational content and grants parents the authority to challenge any book or material they consider inappropriate for students. The central problem, as defined by (Fowler, 2013, pp. 15–17; Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019, pp. 52–54) this policy seeks to address is the perceived exposure of students to materials deemed inappropriate or harmful, particularly content related to race, gender identity, and sexuality. This issue is framed as a need to protect children and uphold parental rights in determining what educational content suits their children. Florida's political culture, characterized as traditionalistic-individualistic, supports limited government intervention in public services while emphasizing the protection of established social orders and individual rights (Fowler, 2013, p. 87). This cultural backdrop influences the framing of HB 1467, aligning it with conservative social values and raising significant concerns about freedom of information, educational equity, and censorship in public schools.

The primary objective of HB 1467 is to increase parental control and transparency in selecting instructional materials in public schools. The law mandates that school districts create a publicly accessible online database of all instructional and library materials, providing complete visibility for parents and the community. A formal review process by certified media specialists ensures that content is age-appropriate and free from harmful material. Additionally, parents are empowered to review and challenge materials they find unsuitable. School districts must also submit annual reports on content challenges and removals to the state. These measures prioritize parental input while increasing state oversight of educational materials.

Florida's HB 1467(2022) was selected for analysis because of its impact on educational freedom, access to information, and the shifting balance of power among the state, schools, and parents. The policy serves as a politically charged response to ongoing educational, cultural, and ideological debates, making it a compelling case for examination through distinct theoretical frameworks. As explained by (Fowler, 2013, pp.92-102), its implications are deeply intertwined with competing values. Economically, the policy affects book publishers, authors, and illustrators, particularly those whose works are challenged or

banned, resulting in financial losses for some and potential gains for others who align with state-approved content. Additionally, school districts may face staffing reductions for media specialists and teachers due to shifting responsibilities and budget constraints.

Regarding power dynamics, HB 1467 consolidates authority by limiting access to certain information, reducing academic freedom, and creating job insecurity for education professionals involved in content selection. Regarding maintaining social order, supporters argue that limiting specific materials protects students from exposure to harmful or controversial content. However, the policy also emphasizes individualism by prioritizing individual parents' concerns, allowing a single complaint to dictate the removal of materials and thereby restricting diverse perspectives and student self-expression. The policy's primary stakeholders include parents, students, school administrators, teachers, and media specialists. By amplifying parental authority, HB 1467 significantly shapes students' educational experiences while limiting educators' autonomy in selecting instructional materials.

Evaluation of Florida's HB 1467 (2022) using Meltzer and Schwartz Criteria

As noted by Anderson (2011, pp. 299–306), there are multiple ways to evaluate policy, and no single method applies universally. The choice of evaluation depends on the purpose and significance of the policy analysis, the unique challenges of each policy, and the need for diverse evaluation processes and approaches. To analyze HB 1467, I am applying the policy evaluation criteria outlined by Meltzer and Schwartz (2019, pp. 116–123), which provides critical insights into the policy's implementation and impact.

Effectiveness: Florida's HB 1467 aims to enhance parental involvement and ensure transparency in selecting instructional materials in public schools. The Florida Department of Education reported that 72% of school districts experienced increased parental challenges to educational materials, demonstrating higher engagement (Mosac, 2024). However, the policy's ambiguous language has led to inconsistent implementation, with educators raising concerns about potential censorship and the narrowing of educational content (Li, 2024). These inconsistencies undermine the policy's ability to improve educational quality across districts uniformly.

Equity: The policy raises significant equity concerns, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. Reports show a 25% reduction in access to culturally diverse materials for minority students in urban districts (Li, 2024), suggesting the policy unintentionally favors dominant parental voices while marginalizing educators and underrepresented communities. The absence of safeguards to protect diverse perspectives exacerbates educational inequities.

Feasibility: HB 1467 imposes a considerable administrative burden on school districts, requiring extensive material cataloging and review processes. Districts with fewer resources struggle to comply, leading to inconsistent enforcement (Mosac, 2024). Additionally, legal challenges and public opposition threaten its long-term sustainability. Poorly defined regulatory policies often encounter feasibility issues when districts lack the infrastructure to implement mandates effectively (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019).

Cost: The policy entails substantial financial costs for training staff, managing content reviews, and handling parental challenges, without allocated state funding. Districts must divert resources, worsening budget pressures and widening disparities between well-funded and under-resourced districts.

Efficiency: HB 1467's efficiency is compromised by the disproportionate relationship between its high implementation costs and limited benefits. Administrative burdens and inconsistent guidelines result in operational inefficiencies, reducing the policy's intended impact. Without more transparent processes, its resource demands outweigh its goals.

Analyzing Florida's HB 1467 Through McDonnell and Elmore's Policy Instruments

McDonnell and Elmore (1987) classify policy instruments into five types: mandates, capacity-building, inducements, system change, and hortatory policy. A mandate is a policy tool that regulates the actions of individuals and organizations by establishing specific behaviors required for a defined group, accompanied by penalties for non-compliance (McDonnell, 1994). This enforcement can take various forms, such as statutes, administrative rules, court rulings, or school policies. Mandates are most effective when uniform behavior across a group is necessary, and enforcement is feasible (McDonnell, 1994). Ideally, mandates result in consistent, socially beneficial actions. However, due to their authoritative and punitive nature, they often lead to strained relationships between the enforcing body and those resistant to compliance. The Mandate policy instrument is used for analyzing HB 1467 because it focuses on enforcing compliance through formal rules. The policy requires school districts to catalog instructional materials and empowers parents to challenge content, directly aligning with mandates that dictate behavior through established regulations. By standardizing procedures statewide, HB 1467 promotes uniform compliance across districts. Although not overtly punitive, it pressures schools through accountability measures, reflecting typical mandate enforcement. As a regulatory policy, HB 1467's formal guidelines and authority shift to parents align with a mandate.

Analyzing Florida's HB 1467 (2022) Through Lowi's Policy Typology

Lowi's Policy Typology offers a structural and political framework for analyzing the impact of Florida's HB 1467. Based on the premise that "policy determines politics" (Lowi, 1972), this framework categorizes policies by how they allocate power and resources among stakeholders. Regulatory policies consist of broadly defined rules enforced across large

populations (kraft & Furlong, 2007), and HB 1467 exemplifies this as it mandates school districts to catalog instructional materials and empowers parents to challenge educational content, a structure that has proven highly effective in mobilizing parental engagement (Mosac, 2024) and demonstrating how such policies often provoke stakeholder action.

However, Lowi's framework falls short of addressing equity concerns. The policy disproportionately affects marginalized groups, with minority students in urban districts experiencing a significant decline in access to culturally diverse materials (Li, 2024). This shift in authority from educators to parents neglects the broader implications for inclusive education. Additionally, the policy's vague language results in inconsistent implementation, reflecting medium feasibility. Cost considerations are also absent in Lowi's analysis, overlooking the financial strain placed on schools to comply without additional funding. This gap undermines the policy's efficiency, as resource constraints hinder effective implementation.

Analyzing Florida's HB 1467 (2022) Through Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking Theory, developed by Weick (1995), provides an interpretive framework for understanding how stakeholders construct meaning around policies like Florida's HB 1467. This theory emphasizes how individuals interpret policies based on their identities, social contexts, and past experiences. It offers insights into how ambiguous policy language can result in diverse and sometimes conflicting responses (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Sensemaking Theory, when evaluated through an equity lens, highlights how HB 1467 disproportionately affects marginalized groups, particularly minority students, by limiting access to culturally diverse educational materials. This interpretation reveals the policy's unintended role in deepening educational inequities by amplifying certain stakeholder voices while silencing others. The theory also addresses feasibility, illustrating how educators and administrators adapt to the policy's ambiguous mandates. Their varied responses reflect the interpretive processes necessary for implementing unclear policies, though these adaptations differ across districts.

Regarding cost, Sensemaking Theory acknowledges indirect burdens such as increased workloads for educators and the narrowing of curricular diversity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). However, it lacks a comprehensive analysis of the policy's financial impact, limiting its ability to fully assess the economic strain on school districts. Additionally, its emphasis on stakeholder perceptions over operational factors reduces its effectiveness in evaluating efficiency, as it overlooks how resources are allocated and how implementation could be optimized for better outcomes.

Comparative Analysis and Determination of the Most Appropriate Theoretical Lens

Lowi's Policy Typology effectively explains the structural and political dynamics of HB 1467 by classifying it as a regulatory policy that deliberately shifts power from educators

to parents. This categorization clarifies how the policy successfully mobilized parental engagement, reflected in the increased content challenges in school districts (Mosac, 2024). Furthermore, Lowi’s framework provides insight into how regulatory policies often provoke political conflict and stakeholder mobilization. However, it inadequately addresses the policy’s equity implications, particularly its disproportionate impact on marginalized student groups, such as the reduced access to culturally diverse materials among minority students (Li, 2024). Additionally, Lowi’s framework does not fully account for school districts' financial burdens and resource constraints, overlooking key aspects of policy feasibility and efficiency.

In contrast, Sensemaking Theory offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding by focusing on how stakeholders interpret and respond to the policy based on their identities, social contexts, and experiences (Weick, 1995). This framework exposes the ambiguity in HB 1467’s language, leading to inconsistent implementation. While some parents feel empowered, many educators engage in self-censorship, narrowing the curriculum to avoid conflict (Mosac, 2024). Sensemaking Theory also uncovers how the policy disproportionately affects marginalized groups and better explains how stakeholders adapt to unclear mandates. However, it lacks attention to financial costs and resource efficiency.

Table 1. Comparing both lenses with criteria by (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019)

Alternative	Criteria					
	Effectiveness	Equity	Feasibility	Cost	Efficiency	Overall Feasibility
Lowi’s Policy Typology	High	Low	Medium	Low	Medium:	Medium
Sensemaking Theory	Medium	Medium-High	High	Medium	Low	Medium-High

Source: Authors

When comparing the two frameworks across key evaluation criteria, Sensemaking Theory demonstrates a more comprehensive capacity to address the complex, real-world challenges posed by HB 1467. While Lowi’s Typology effectively explains the policy's political motivations and stakeholder mobilization, it lacks the analytical depth to explore the nuanced consequences of its implementation. In contrast, Sensemaking Theory provides critical insights into the behavioral responses and interpretive processes that shape how the policy is enacted, making it better suited to evaluate its practical and social impacts (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Given the ambiguous nature of HB 1467 and the significant role of stakeholder interpretation in its implementation, Sensemaking Theory offers a more appropriate and comprehensive framework for analysis. It uncovers how the policy's design influences stakeholder

behavior and reveals the unintended consequences that arise from its vague language and lack of operational clarity. By highlighting these complexities, Sensemaking Theory allows policymakers to understand the on the ground realities of HB 1467 better and develop more targeted strategies for improving its implementation.

Implications for Policy Design and Practice

The application of Sensemaking Theory to HB 1467 shows that the policy's significant challenges arise not only from its regulatory intent but from the ambiguous environment it creates for frontline implementers. Therefore, the primary implication for policymakers is that policy design must account for the inevitability of sensemaking. Rather than viewing stakeholder interpretation as a problem of non-compliance, policies should be drafted to guide and support the interpretive process. Future policies should do following: First, address ambiguity with operational clarity by providing precise definitions and examples. Second, facilitate constructive sensemaking through state-funded support structures like training and shared resource databases; and finally, include a formal "equity lens" during the drafting process to anticipate and mitigate disproportionate impacts on marginalized groups.

This analysis shows that the ultimate success of a policy is not just a function of its political design but is also profoundly shaped by the meanings that stakeholders make from it. That is why A sensemaking perspective is not merely an analytical tool but a necessary component for designing education policies that are both effective and equitable in practice.

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Conflict of Interest

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

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