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Contemporary global education goals: narrative and networks.

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This research began from my frustration working in education policy of feeling as if I were trapped in a hamster run of ‘doing, doing, doing’ when you’re in policy work, and not having a clear power map of the global policy space. So I went away in order to find out. What I am attempting to do in my research is reveal some of what happens behind the scenes in the global education and development policy network; not because I think that’s more important than anything else – the most important thing has to be getting the development and education work right on the ground, remembering that developing countries spend far more on education than any of the global policy actors I present here. Yet, this is undeniably an important context in which policy work sits; a context that we can understand in order to work more effectively in it.

There are two parts to my presentation: first, establishing what global education goals mean to the contemporary global policy actors that I have been interviewing. That is, which policy option has become dominant: Of all the things that education and development could mean, what is it that global policymakers are currently saying this notion of global education goals means. The second part of my presentation investigates what happens behind the scenes in the global policy network; what it is that may have led to this policy option becoming preferred over others.

I’m talking about policy options here – what does that mean?

The general rubric under which we talk about education and international development is education for all or ‘EFA’. What does education for all mean to you? Please take a minute to write down what comes to mind when you hear this phrase.

The reason why I asked you to write that down is because I’m now going to run through what it has meant and means now for the global policymakers I’ve been interviewing. I’d like you to compare some of the policy narrative that I’m presenting here with what you’ve written down. I’m not presenting this to tell you what to think or that your definition is wrong, just to demonstrate that different people mean different things by the same phrase, and that these may not be the same as your definition. Also it’s to let you know what these global policymakers prioritise currently within the possible meanings of EFA.

What I’m presenting now are historical articulations of what education and development may mean. From the declarations, covenants and conventions between 1948 and 1989, to the six goals of the Jomtien declaration of Education for All in 1990, to the Dakar Framework in 2000 which again comprised six goals, and the two education MDGs agreed later that same year, these are the historical articulations of global education goals. I keep using the word historical – if these goals are what was agreed, then why would I insist on categorising them as historical? What are currently understood to be the competing narrative or definitions of EFA? In my research I have been collecting and analyzing global policy actors’ narrative on EFA, in order to identify which policy option dominates in 2011, rather than relying on historical policy documents, because policy actors may be taking decisions on very different bases since the adoption of these global goals in 1990 and 2000.

So, how have I been doing that? Proponents of narrative policy analysis argue that the stories that policy actors tell about policies reveal the assumptions underlying their policy decisions. This chimes with the ways in which policy actors themselves describe their own work, ‘do I have my story right?’; ‘what is my narrative?’

What my data suggest is that contemporary - rather than documented - narrative of EFA are narrowed to the two education MDGs at best, and access to basic education at worst but also most commonly.

Another advantage of using narrative data collection techniques and analysis, is that I have been able to identify the ways in which global policy actors are currently projecting that the EFA narrative may change in the near future: broadening from access alone to encompass notions of quality and equity too. This is the consensus view across my informants from civil society, governments, international organisations, and the private sector, indicating the emergence of a new consensus view, or metanarrative, upon which policy actors are basing their policy actions (Fischer 2003; Hajer 2003).

So here we have a consensus, but there is still conflict between definitions of equity and quality. We'll take quality first: please write down *your* definition of 'quality education' and share it with person next to you. *Debrief*.

In the same way, different global policy actors in my study construct quality education in widely divergent ways. What my data show are competing narrative of quality, with widely differing implications for educational outcomes and processes.

As well as quality, the other battleground under the surface consensus of 'access + quality + equity' is over meanings of equity. First it's important to differentiate between equity and equality, and I apologise here if this is a detail of meaning in English that doesn't translate well - but it is significant, and not just for academics, that global policy actors are talking about equity not equality. For example an ex-soviet state dismantled the soviet-era crony-based system of entry to university and replaced it with a system in which everyone had completely equal access to university. But what has happened in practice is that the children of the same group of people as before are still more likely to

get into university and are therefore being privileged. Thus what was designed as an equal system has profoundly inequitable outcomes.

So could you write down what equity might look like in an education system?

Could you share now with a different person? *Debrief.*

In the same way, global policy makers are reporting competing definitions of equity. In this case, the same policy actor reported two very different views of equity. In the first, lack of quality in education is defined in terms of inequity; as a consequence of poverty and marginalisation. The second narrative is significantly different from the first. Historically, there have been two competing narrative of 'education for employment' as separate from 'education for democracy'. Here however, the narrative are coming together, such that education for employment is narrated as leading to democratic development. The structure of the narrative is significant: education for employment leads to democracy, not the other way round.

We may consider therefore, that although the current metanarrative might suggest that the reduced EFA narrative of access to basic education is about to be broadened to encompass quality and equity too, that these notions are contested and the implementation of one of these competing policy positions may constitute a further narrowing of the EFA agenda. Critical, too, at this point is to reflect on how one might put any one of these visions of quality and equity into practice.

These, then, are the competing contemporary narrative in EFA. These narrative can be seen to reveal the contested assumptions underlying the notions of quality and equity beneath the consensus narrative of 'access plus quality plus equity'. The collection and analysis of narrative data enable insights into the assumptions underlying contemporary global policy action in education and development, and global policy actors' projections as to how this might change in the near future.

This suggests that Dakar vs. MDGs vs. access to basic education is no longer the central narrative competition. Rather, there have been important shifts in the focus of global policy actors in the global EFA web of influence.

Moving onto the second part of this presentation, which focuses on this web of influence. How might we consider that these changes in policy narrative of education for all have come about? Policy narrative such as those we’ve just seen ‘do not exert power by themselves’, Hajer (2003: 107) reminds us: actors set out to promote one policy narrative or option over another. These global policy actors interact with each other behind the scenes, influencing each other to adopt one or other policy option.

Therefore, in order to understand this behind-the-scenes action, I am also using network analysis. This network approach may enable me to better investigate and understand the webs of influence that policy actors weave.

As with narrative analysis, network analysis is also seen to reflect what global policy actors actually do as they network across institutions. Global policy actors interact with each other behind the scenes, influencing each other to adopt one or other policy option. The fact that EFA now means ‘access + quality + equity’ is due to people having discussions and taking decisions to promote and implement this version of EFA rather than, for example the 6 goals agreed in Dakar promising cradle-to-grave quality education for all.

There are a multitude of diverse global policy actors identified as active in global policy may work together across institutional boundaries. And these global relationships may influence the ways in which global education goals are constructed, articulated and implemented.

First, let’s take a look at the ways in which global education goals were agreed and by whom. In Jomtien, for example, a diverse group negotiated and agreed the broad EFA

agenda, and a similar group met in Dakar. The MDGs, however, were agreed by states alone, with the support of the OECD in drafting the goals.

But these were very big, high level meetings, so formal structures were set up to coordinate continuing EFA policy action. All of these are networked structures [detail on presentation]. UNESCO is also undertaking a restructuring process, but their formal networks are already fairly representative. So they are attempting to streamline and bring in higher level support for education as an issue within development.

So these are the actors; and the formal relationships between them. It is important to know who they are and how they interrelate. So far, I have presented the formal coordination set up after Dakar and very recent changes to that. It is useful for you to know what this global network looks like, but even more important is to recognise that developing countries themselves spend far more on education than these donors who are setting policy priorities. Additionally, it is important to reflect on what you want for your network in comparison. Particularly, who is in or out of your network, and how you work together?

In addition to these formal structures, there are also informal relationships between global policy actors. By informal, I mean the people they may choose to talk to outside of official meetings. And I have collected data from global policy actors on who they choose to interact with, that is, how they organise their own professional networks as well as how they are organised into networks.

This is a fairly rough first take on my visualisation of the informal networks among global policy actors. This shows only the existence of network ties, as reported by network members.

I have tried to abstract something more immediately recognisable here. What is coming through from my analysis of the network data – at this stage – is that there is a core and periphery structure in this informal network. The core is made up of the triumvirate of DfID, USAID and the World Bank: these are the global policy actors with whom most network members claimed policy relations. The fact that many of these were not reciprocated is considered to increase the prestige of these three actors (Scott 2000). Just as at school, if I say you are my friend but you do not say I am yours, then you are probably more popular than I am, and higher up the pecking order. Also central are the Fast Track Initiative (FTI), or Global Partnership for education (GPE) now and World Economic Forum (WEF).

At the bottom, we can see civil society actors who are densely interconnected (meaning they talk a lot to each other) and claim relationships into the core. These reported relationships are largely unreciprocated, or at least not considered significant enough by the core policy actors to be reported in interview as among these central policy actors’ more frequent interactions. Also at the bottom left corner of the policy network are those traditional policy actors who are narratively constructed as leaving the EFA policy space to pursue issues such as conflict and education. That conflict is sited outside of global policy actors’ constructions of EFA underlines the extent to which the contemporary narrative of EFA differs from the intention of the documented policy goals covering education for ALL.

If we move to the top of this network diagram, it is striking that only one actor reports network connections with Brazil, India (and then to an NGO in India), and Russia; and only two to South Korea, both of these in the context of South Korea’s hosting of the 2011 G20 meeting. This stands in contrast to the consensus narrative of global education policy actors that these emerging actors are important to the future of global education goals, both as governments whose populations need to be educated, and also as potential future regional or global powers and development aid donors. None of my interviewees has reported a relationship with China.

Not one of these global policy actors informed me that they invested time, energy or resources in building and maintaining relationships with countries in the global South. Yet these countries are the ‘subjects’ of this policy agenda. These relationships may grow as a result of the new formal structures, like the GPE Board established in 2011, that now involve more developing countries. However, these relationships are not established and will be affected by existing relationships. Furthermore, in interview those global policy actors who lead on formal structures that already include developing countries, such as the EFA High Level Working Group, did not consider individuals from developing countries as frequent contacts.

The private sector in this network topology is represented as peripheral to the central web. However, private sector actors from WEF and CSR arms of global corporations connect into the core of the network. In particular, the relationships these private sector actors claim are reciprocated by the World Bank (in the core), suggesting a more equal status for the private sector within the network hierarchy.

Abstracting further out into a much tidier analytical diagram. This diagram also demonstrates an advantage of the network approach where we can identify individual policy actors within sectors and institutions. For example, those actors inside the global education web of influence identified as ‘private sector’ are identified as separate to the Foundations – that were the private sector representatives at the Jomtien and, less so, at Dakar meetings (WCEFA 1990; WEF 2000), and who are now represented on the FTI/GPE Board and Financial Advisory Committee. Here, private sector actors come from the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) arms of these companies.

Furthermore, largely absent are network connections out to the emerging actors that these global policy actors identify as significant in their narrative, and that have been central to negotiations in Busan last week [Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness 29 November-1 December 2011, Busan, South Korea].

So what is it that looking at these policy narrative and networks may tell us?

Narrative techniques of data collection and analysis reveal that neither the documented policies of the six EFA goals agreed at Jomtien and Dakar nor the education MDGs comprise global policy actors’ working definition of global education policy goals. The current policy consensus metanarrative consists of the much-reduced policy agenda of access to basic education.

There is, however, a new policy consensus emerging. This new consensus is discursively constructed as broadening the current working definition of EFA as access to encompass notions of basic education to encompass notions of quality and equity. However, there continues to be narrative competition between divergent definitions of quality and equity. The result of this competition holds implications for the implementation of both quality and equity, and also for the potential broadening or narrowing of the EFA agenda.

It can be argued that the stabilisation of this new narrative of ‘access + quality + equity’ at the global level has emerged as a result of influence – between global policy actors as well as from further afield in the political ecology. What network approaches have permitted me to do is get beneath the surface of the institutions and sectors identified as significant in the global policy web of influence.

A combination of narrative and network approaches enables the construction of a more nuanced account of the global education policy space.

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on the potential significance of this research on your work. In the first instance, it is important to know the global context in which your network, strategy and implementation decisions sit. Second, the changes that have come about in the meanings of ‘education for all’ have come about because of discussions that people – like you – had; in networks – like yours; and decisions that

these people took. And, critically, in the way people made their arguments within an understanding of this context. People also took decisions to change the formal structures involved in making these decisions to enable more equal representation. Network members also take decisions day by day to contact a rather than b; to share information with x rather than y. And this makes a difference – to the network they construct and to directions that policy may take.

There are two questions I’d like to leave you with for your consideration this afternoon and in moving your strategy forward:

First, what do quality and equity mean to you? How might you work with people whose definition differs from yours? And how might you see that in your strategy and implementation?

And second, who are you networking with and how? Who’s in; who’s out; and how is that decided?

Policy ideas are central to education and development; but it is people like you, people like us, networking and working together who shape the meaning of phrases such as ‘education for all’, and who have the opportunity to be part of shaping the future meaning of ‘quality’ and ‘equity’ in education and development.

Thank you.

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