



Keeping the national standard? Contextual dilemmas of educational marginalization in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study describes how Namibian policy actors make sense of educational marginalization when faced with contradictions between the value of diversity and the need to maintain the national standard. Policy actors in higher levels of the hierarchical system are more influenced by international ECE agendas while those at the community level want contextual solutions. The study concludes that this policy formation context is caught between local realities and globally defined international standards; however, policies that are disconnected from the sociocultural context of implementation are unjust and antithetical to the holistic development of children and a hindrance to national development.

1. Introduction

This study joins those by scholars who take a critical approach to policy analysis, viewing policies as much more than mere expressions of political purpose (Olssen et al., 2004; Gale, 2003). Rather, policies are seen as “cultural-textual expressions of a political practice” governing what can and should be done (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 770). In the field of early childhood education (ECE) this means that policies are aimed at concerns of quality, within specific sociocultural contexts (Serpell and Nsamenang, 2014). Within particular contexts, policies acknowledge parents as the primary caregivers and facilitate transitions between home and school environments (Inglis, 2008; Moll et al., 1992). The distance between policy makers at the national level and those charged with policy implementation on the ground, requires the help of mediators, people who can relate to both sides of the policy context. Ball refers to persons who are relied upon by others to relate policy to context as “key mediators” (1993, p.12). This study investigated how national and local policy actors make sense of educational marginalization and the impact of their differences on efforts to improve pre-primary education in Namibia.

One of the greatest pitfalls of ECE in the Global South has been to misjudge the complexity of policy implementation (Awopegba et al., 2013). Despite rapid response to international demands for set standards (UNESCO, 2014), educational marginalization persists in rural and indigenous communities (Hays, 2011). Formal ECE programs tend to rely on ideologies imported from the Global North (Cleghorn and

Prochner, 2010; Penn, 2011), disregarding the uniqueness of each country (Ng'asike, 2014) and the realities in which most marginalized children live (Pamo, 2011). Ideologically abstract ECE policies have resulted in a widening gap between policy rhetoric and implementation (Ball, 1993; UNESCO, 2010).

Critical policy studies suggest that the viability of policies is tested in practice (Dyer, 1999; Olssen et al., 2004). Policy actors at the different levels of administration have been recognized as key players in the process of policy interpretation (Jansen, 2002; Spillane et al., 2002). Sense-making theories, such as that of Dervin (1998), have provided helpful frameworks for understanding the thinking of policy actors. Increased understanding of policy actors' sense-making could lead to narrowing the gap between theory and practice, thereby increasing quality by creating more meaningful ECE experiences for the most marginalized children.

This study thus addresses the fact that researchers have neglected how negotiation and appropriation affect policy implementation (Levinson et al., 2009). This is a significant gap in the literature especially with regard to Africa, where local perspectives and processes of early childhood development are not well recognized in ECE policies. It is important to gain understanding of the potential value of a sound ECE and what threatens its provision (Lewis and Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Models of ECE that are grounded in African precepts are needed (Nsamenang, 2005). This applies also Namibia, the context of this study.

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2. Revisiting ECE policy formation in socioculturally diverse contexts

Traditional approaches to policy studies describe policy formation as a hierarchical, coherent, linear process (Newman et al., 2013). Policies are developed based on evidence of an assumed need which enables policy makers to articulate the right course of action. Policies communicate political decisions which tend to go uncontested from policy makers to policy implementers (Olssen et al., 2004). If policy implementation fails, failures are typically attributed to unsound policy design, lack of institutional capacity, implementer misunderstandings and negative attitudes (Carnoy, 1999; Olssen et al., 2004; UNESCO, 2014).

2.1. Policy research

Critical policy research recognizes the complexity and ambiguity of policy formation during which mediators interpret the policies “in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and contexts” (Ball, 1993, p. 11). Policy content is compromised at various stages through bargaining, arguing and lobbying (Dyer, 1999; Gale, 2003). Any compromises during the process are often made at the expense of those who have less voice in the political and administrative arenas of society. Levinson et al. (2009, p. 774) argue that “dominant groups position themselves best to order an education system in its own vision and interest”. Even if policies appear to defend the rights of vulnerable groups, without a situationally constructed will to policy, they might remain as mere political symbolism (Jansen, 2002). Especially in the former apartheid countries, policies should be seen as the practice of power that requires constant and critical review in order to bring about more just education (Jansen, 2002; Sayed and Ahmed, 2011).

Studies from Africa highlight policy implementation as a matter of concern. In many instances, there is an evident gap between policy rhetoric and implementation (Ebrahim, 2012). This gap is largely attributed to the policy content which reflects the ideological origins of the Global North (Penn, 2011). That is, the content tends to reflect the realities of the African political class and educational elite (Nsamenang, 2005) rather than the cultural values and belief systems of the majority of the citizens (Carnoy, 1999; Serpell and Nsamenang, 2014). If the theories that inform the development of ECE fail to capture the local realities, policy makers are only creating fictions of childhood (Lewis and Watson-Gegeo, 2004).

The more ideologically abstract policies are, the more distant in origin they are from practice, and therefore, the less likely they are “to be accommodated in unmediated form into the context of practice” (Ball, 1993, p. 13). Some have suggested that the writing of policies should be primarily done by public bureaucrats and public officials who “might be better positioned to write policy text because they possess more of the relevant capitals that the context values” (Gale, 2003, p. 225). This perspective assumes that educational policies are not merely technical but expressive of locally defined concerns and needs (Olssen et al., 2004; Sayed and Ahmed, 2011) and interpreted through subjective knowledge and experiences (Spillane et al., 2002). Hence, understanding policy formation requires understanding how policy actors make sense of the central phenomena that characterize their contexts.

2.2. Sense-making

Sense-making refers to the process by which people give meaning to experience. According to Spillane et al., (2002) it is a process of interpretation that draws from individuals’ knowledge base of understanding, beliefs and attitudes. Sense-making is a metaphor of “human beings traveling through time, space, coming out of situations with history and partial instruction, arriving at new situations, facing gaps, building bridges across those gaps, evaluating outcomes and moving on” (Dervin, 1998, p. 39).

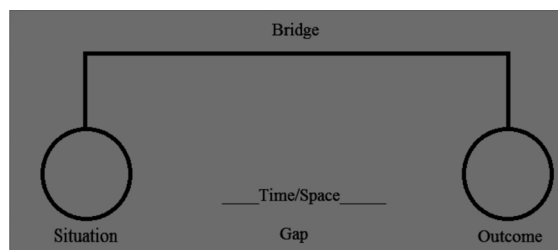


Fig. 1. Illustration of sense-making process.
Adapted from Dervin (1998, p. 39).

Researchers have used the sense-making approach to investigate the gap between how administrators describe policy users and the realities of what users and the public think and do (Awopegba et al., 2013; Jansen, 2002; Weick et al., 2005). This approach has proven helpful in identifying people’s needs and developing systems that respond to these needs. Dervin’s model suggests that sense-making can be explored by understanding the situation (time, context) in which the gap occurs, understanding the gap itself (questions that complicate progress) and the step-taking in crossing the gap (finding solutions, coming up with ideas), as well as the desired outcome of this process (Fig. 1).

The sense-making framework has been utilized largely in the design of communication, information and knowledge management systems (Dervin, 1998). Savolainen (2006, p. 1) suggests that the “methodology mandates a highly flexible and context-sensitive approach” to information use in general. Studies that utilize it can potentially influence policy implementation, especially in contexts where the gap between theory and practice appears to be wide.

2.3. Pre-primary policies in context: Namibia

Namibia is a multicultural and multilingual country with a population of approximately 2.1 million (Namibia, 2013). Being classified as an upper middle income country in 2009, Namibia represents one of the wealthier African countries. Yet, for years it has been one of the world’s most unequal countries in income distribution. This complex and multilayered inequality is often attributed to Namibia’s colonial and apartheid history. Among others, the education sector is characterized by inequalities. Wealthier urban children study mostly in private schools and achieve better learning outcomes than their rural peers who rely solely on less well-resourced public education.

Since 2000, ECE has emerged as a key reform area fueled by international agendas such as “Education for All.” In 2008, the Namibian cabinet approved a plan to include pre-primary education (ages 5–6) in public schools, a decision which was followed by a comprehensive reform process (Namibia, 2012). So far, the milestones of ECE development have included establishment of a career path for pre-primary teachers, development of a pre-primary syllabus and teachers’ manual, as well as aligning the regulatory and policy environment to accommodate the particular aspects of pre-primary. At the school level, the expansion of pre-primary education has required in-service training, recruitment of new personnel and construction of new classroom facilities to mention but a few of the adaptations. Despite these efforts taken to enhance educational equality starting from pre-primary, the latest reports indicate significant learning deficits especially in the basic competencies of rural children (Taniguchi, 2015; UNICEF, 2011). This reality suggests questions regarding the implementation of ECE policies in the most marginalized contexts (Penn, 2008).

As noted above, the voice of local policy actors has not been sufficiently researched (Spillane et al., 2002). Understanding policy formation requires going beyond institutional conditions to being present at the moment of policy formation to observe the relations and interests that obtain (Levinson et al., 2009, p.789). Educational marginalization characterizes the realities of rural communities in Namibia. This is why

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