



Policy formation in the context of global governance: Rational, organizational, and political perspectives on policymaking in El Salvador



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ABSTRACT

Plan 2021 is a national education strategy released by the Salvadoran Ministry of Education (MINED) in March of 2005 to guide education policy through 2021. According to the policy itself, preparation for Plan 2021 began in June 2004 and was the product of four disparate inputs. These include: (a) review of existing research on education produced between 2002 and 2004, (b) creation of a Presidential Commission to offer recommendations, (c) inclusion of commitments made by El Salvador to international agreements (e.g., Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals), and (d) execution of a series of consultations at the local level throughout the country (MINED 2005b). Thus, according to the policy document itself, not only were each of these four inputs given equal weight, but, additionally, there was no involvement by international actors, with the MINED alone managing the process. However, even a cursory search for information related to Plan 2021 indicates that a range of international actors was involved, thus raising questions about how official accounts of the policy's formation diverge from the process as it actually happened. The case of this policy likewise raises questions about how to investigate and interpret such processes. The present paper not only reveals how Plan 2021 was actually made but also attempts to make a contribution by suggesting the relevance of multi-perspective analysis, in addition to applying multiple perspectives—namely, rational, organizational, and political perspectives—to the interpretation of this case. The content of this analysis is particularly relevant at this point in time to the field of international education policy as scholars are grappling with how to understand and investigate processes of education policy formation characterized by involvement and influence from external (i.e., international) actors. The article concludes by underscoring the utility of this framework while also recommending that it be used in conjunction with insights from recent scholarship on the global governance of education.

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1. Introduction

Plan 2021 is easily classifiable. This national education strategy, which the Salvadoran Ministry of Education (MINED) produced in March of 2005 to guide education policy through 2021, is an example of both hortatory and capacity building policy (Fowler, 2004; McDonnell and Elmore, 1987). In that it details a vision based on specific ideals (e.g., productivity, competitiveness, security, democracy, equity and justice, and sustainability), it is a hortatory policy; in that it specifies goals, objectives, and provisions geared to consolidate democracy and increase national competitiveness in

globalizing world, it is a capacity building policy (MINED, 2005a, 2005b). However, while the ability to classify policies is important for our understanding of the nature of the policy and what it aims to accomplish, the policy's overarching objectives and general policy provisions (discussed further later) do not raise eyebrows. On the other hand, what is exceptional about the policy is that it, unlike other policy documents, offers a description of how it was created (MINED, 2005b).

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Millennium Development Goals), and (d) execution of a series of consultations at the local level throughout the country (MINED, 2005b). Judging by the depiction offered in this document, not only were each of these four inputs given equal weight, but, additionally, there was no involvement by international actors and the MINED alone managed the process.

That the MINED offers the public an account of the policy formation process is of note; yet, the account seems incomplete, lacking any sense of agency. In fact, the actual process that engendered Plan 2021 is not discussed at all, apart from quick reference to these four inputs. This raises questions about how the process of policy formation actually proceeded, and, subsequently, how we should make sense of this policy case. In particular, the fact that a cursory search for information related to the formation of Plan 2021 yields a number of documents produced by international actors raises additional questions about both the MINED avoiding mention of such involvement, and, further, the roles played by these actors in the formation of Plan 2021. As such, the purpose of this paper is to amplify understanding of this policy case through the application of multiple perspectives analysis.¹

The content of this analysis is particularly relevant at this point in time to the field of international education policy. Scholars are grappling with how to understand and investigate processes of education policy formation in the context of global governance; that is, in a context characterized by involvement and influence from external (i.e., international) actors and ideas (Ball, 1998, 2012; Carney, 2008; Carney and Bista, 2009; Dale, 1999, 2000; Edwards, 2012, 2013; Edwards, forthcoming; Edwards and Brehm, 2015; Edwards and Storen, forthcoming; Lingard and Rawolle, 2011; Ramirez et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2002; Samoff, 2007; Verger, 2009; Verger et al., 2016; Verger et al., 2012). Though a number of scholars have begun to analyze such processes (Ball, 2009; Edwards, 2015; Edwards and Loucel, 2016; Edwards et al., 2015; Engel, 2008; Jakobi, 2009; Jules, 2013; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2011; Samoff, 1999; Tarlau, forthcoming), a fundamental issue which this research frequently confronts is the challenge of uncovering and interrogating the details of these policymaking processes. This is not surprising, as it can be difficult to access the information, actors, and spaces that constitute policymaking processes at the nexus of the national and the global. While, the implications of recent scholarship on policy formation in the context of global governance will be discussed further later in this paper, the point here is that the present study seeks to contribute to this literature by depicting the particulars of one such process from El Salvador. In so doing, this article attempts to address a shortcoming in existing literature and may be able to inform how similar research is conducted in the future.

Minimal research exists on Plan 2021 formation. Quijada et al. (2009) overview education reform in El Salvador since the beginning of the 90s, but only gloss over the formation of Plan 2021. Rosekrans (2006) describes Plan 2021's process of policy formation, but limits discussion to the perspective of the United States Agency for International Development in El Salvador (USAID/ES).² Lastly, Edwards (2013) analyzes in detail steps in the process of policy formation, but focuses exclusively on the dynamics of interaction among central actors from government, non-governmental organizations, and multilateral donor

institutions. The present research broadens the scope of analysis to investigate not only key actor interaction, but also to characterize and explain the policy formation process more completely and robustly. For example, one aspect considered somewhat here but not considered by Edwards (2013) is the content of Plan 2021.

But why apply a multiple perspectives framework to the analysis? Malen and Knapp (1997) contend:

A multiple perspectives approach to policy analysis is promising because it exposes the complexities of policy activities and encourages the consideration of rival interpretations of policy developments. Each lens 'has the potential to generate a distinctive picture' (Dubnick and Bardes: 172). Each unearths aspects and intricacies of policy that would be easily missed with a single lens look. Each can help 'keep the windows of the mind open' (Pal, 1992: 26) to the different or deeper understandings that can be engendered through the intelligent application of multiple perspectives (p. 435).

In short, the application of multiple perspectives – specifically, in the present case, rational, organizational and political perspectives – facilitates a thorough examination that broadens how the policy case is understood while simultaneously illuminating which explanations – or which combinations of them – are more or less plausible. This framework is thus a heuristic that enhances understanding and sharpens analysis, such that insights can be generated that are of relevance to those who endeavor to explain processes of education policymaking in low- and middle-income country contexts. This is not to say, however, that the framework is without limitations, as will be discussed in the final section of this paper in relation to ways to further refine this framework.

In order to address its stated purposes, the paper proceeds by first elaborating the three perspectives that will serve as lenses for analysis—that is, the rational, organizational, and political perspectives. Second, the data collection and data analysis methods are detailed. Third, the context and antecedents of the policymaking process are presented. Subsequently, in the fourth section, the process of producing Plan 2021 is characterized. Then, in the fifth section, this process is analyzed and interpreted through the rational, organizational, and political theoretical perspectives. The sixth section turns to a consideration of the contributions and limitations of both the present study and other studies that attempt to unpack policy-making processes, particularly in the context of engagement of international actors. The final section offers a few concluding remarks that focus on suggestions for future avenues for research as well as on recommendations for how to combine the insights of the global governance literature cited above together with the multiple perspectives utilized in this paper.

2. Multiple perspectives on policymaking

This section presets the three theoretical perspectives (rational, organizational and political) of interest on the process of policy formation. Here, I rely on the multiple perspectives framework presented by Malen and Knapp (1997) as well as seminal work of other scholars who have also theorized education policy process, including Allison and Zelikow (1999), Cuban (1990) and Sabatier (1991). Although scholars theorize additional perspectives (e.g., symbolic and normative ones), I follow Allison and Zelikow (1999) in focusing on the rational, organizational and political approaches, for reasons of explanatory power and space constraints.

The remainder of this section briefly summarizes the central tenets, related assumptions, and implications for influencing policy of the rational, organizational, and political perspectives.

¹ A number of scholars have invoked multiple perspectives analyses to facilitate understanding of complex policy cases. Notable examples include Allison and Zelikow (1999), Cuban (1990), Hearn (1993), Ogawa et al. (2003), and Shen (1995). See Finkelstein (1997), and the articles of the same issue of *Journal of Education Policy*, and the articles in that issue for a range of case studies which investigate complex policy cases through innovative approaches.

² Throughout, I use USAID to refer to the organization generally, and USAID/ES to refer to the actions of the country office in El Salvador.

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