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Future-perfect/present-imperfect: Contemporary global constraints on the implementation of a post-2015 education agenda

Moira V. Faul *

University of Cambridge, UK

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ABSTRACT

A future-perfect global education agenda is currently being designed. Much extant research investigates the past-imperfect implementation of successive waves of global education goals. This article is based on a study that investigated the ways in which formal policy commitments in a post-MDGs agenda may be constrained by contemporary global policy practices. Using narrative analysis of interview data from key global policy actors, I argue that future policy will be constrained by: first, the assumptions that currently underlie global policy actors' narratives of quality and equity; and second, new consensual aid implementation mechanisms that monitor narrow definitions of quality.

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1. Introduction

Recent global policy attention has been invested in formulating a future-perfect education agenda that prioritises policy narratives of equitable access to education; quality of learning; global citizenship, skills and jobs; governance and financing for education; lifelong learning (UN: United Nations, 2012a; UNDP, 2012). Much extant research investigates the past-imperfect implementation of successive waves of global education goals. There has, however, been scant attention paid to the dependence of any future education policy on contemporary global education policy-making practices. Such analysis would reveal the ways in which formal policy commitments in a post-MDGs agenda may be constrained by contemporary global policy practices. Using narrative analysis of interview data from key global policy actors, I argue that any future policy agenda will be constrained by two contemporary factors: first, the assumptions that currently underlie global policy actors' narratives of education for all; and second, the innovations in consensual implementation mechanisms that prioritise narrow definitions of quality.

The reputational approach to purposive sampling I employed allowed members of this global policy elite to define the boundaries of the case, at the same time as enabling me to access this small, difficult-to-reach target, resulting in a 75% response rate (Trochim, 2006; Scott, 2000).[1] The individuals identified by established global policy actors as being part of their networks fell into only four of the five categories formally defined as global policy actors by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2013). While donor countries, multilateral agencies/regional banks, civil society and the private sector[2] were identified as significant global interlocutors in practice, recipient countries were not.[3] The sampling strategy chosen dictated that I interview those identified in the field, and constructs these absences as data: a significant finding from this investigation is that recipient governments were not identified in the field as significant interlocutors discussed further in Faul, 2013). Therefore I interviewed 24 individuals from donor countries, multilateral agencies/regional banks, civil society and the private sector between September 2010 and April 2011,

[1] This stands in contrast to the 'positional approach [that] assumes that power lies with specific positions and the people who occupy those positions' (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1247).

[2] Private sector members of this global policy network include Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in addition to Foundations, but the profit-making cores of these corporations remain a notable absence. This is significant in that the profit motive and implications for private sector provision of quality and equitable schooling is prominent in studies of national implementation (see, for example, the debate between Lewin, 2007; Watkins, 2004 vs. Phillipson, 2009; Tooley, 2004).

[3] Equally, emerging donors were not mentioned as interlocutors, yet all interviewees (except multilateral banks) reported that they would like to build better relationships with them.

* Tel.: +44 01223748816.
E-mail address: mvf24@cam.ac.uk

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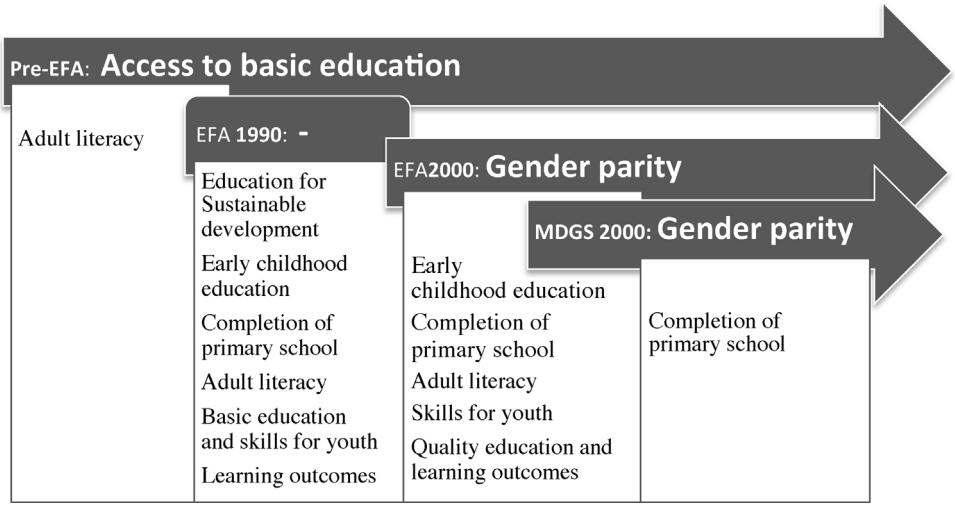

Fig. 1. Policy agendas narrated in interview (grey arrows) or not (white boxes).

resulting in over 40 h of interview recordings. Interviews served to elicit policy-makers' informal assumptions and practices in global education policy. The sample of documents was selected on the basis of their articulation of formal organisational structures and policy positions (WCEFA, 1990b; WEF, 2000b; UK-DfID, 2010; World Bank, 2011). Whilst narrative approaches are well established in studies of educational practice,[4] the potential of narrative approaches to analyse the educational policy arena appears overlooked.[5]

Narratives are considered valuable since they 'present to the researcher embedded and tacit assumptions, meanings, reasonings and patterns of action and inaction' that shape respondents' policy practices (Wengraf, 2001, p. 116).[6] These assumptions and practices may otherwise remain hidden in responses of 'polished and experienced policy-practitioners' (Ozga and Gewirtz, 1994, p. 121). In this paper, I first review the literature on past formal global education policy agendas before analysing the future education agenda global policy actors predict. I then establish which of the myriad potential education policy narratives available will be enforced, and through which mechanisms.

2. Successive waves of global education policymaking

The case of international development and education follows a trajectory from purely state- based declarations, covenants and conventions (UN: United Nations, 1948: Article 26; UN: United Nations, 1966; UNICEF, 1989) to the Jomtien and Dakar Declarations and Frameworks agreed between a multitude of states and non-state stakeholders (WCEFA, 1990a, 1990b; WEF, 2000a, 2000b, respectively). A global educational agenda was then declared by states alone as part of the Millennium Declaration, which was translated into Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3 by multilateral agencies. Most recently, consultation on the post-2015 agenda, and education within that, has encompassed ever broader stakeholders in and arenas of governance.[7] These changes over time indicate more complex governing at the global level by more complex groups of actors 'co-labouring' through more complex modes of governance (Wanna, 2009, p. 266).

In successive waves of global education goals, different policy agendas have been constructed as legitimately requiring policy action. A commitment to Universal Primary Education (UPE) is the only consistent education policy agenda over time. Adult literacy, which has a similarly long history as a policy priority, was not prioritised in the education MDGs (UN: United Nations, 2000). What was also lost between the EFA goals and the MDGS are early years education, concerns with education quality, and specific youth and adult education agendas. Education for sustainable development was prioritised as a goal in the first EFA agenda (WCEFA, 1990a), but was replaced by gender parity in the second (WEF, 2000a). While gender parity in enrolment is a relative latecomer to the policy agenda, it persists between education-specific (WEF, 2000a) and more holistic international policy agendas (UN: United Nations, 2000). These divergent documented policy agendas are afforded different priority in contemporary global policy actors' working assumptions of EFA (Fig. 1).

There is an established body of research that reports the ways in which the meanings attached to EFA have changed in the past. First, the majority of EFA policy research argues that the meanings attributed to the terms 'education' and 'for all' no longer mean what was agreed in Jomtien. What is understood by 'education' and 'learning' has changed significantly since 1990. These words are seen to have become synonymous with 'schools' and 'schooling' (Hoppers, 2009; Torres, 2000). At the same time, the notion of 'basic education' has been reduced to 'primary education' in contrast with the broader agenda negotiated in Jomtien and Dakar (King, 2007; Torres, 2000).

In addition to shrinking meanings of 'education' in EFA, Torres (2000) describes how the meaning of 'for all' has been reduced in

[4] For example, Elbaz (1983) and Hart (1996).

[5] With the notable exception of Ozga and Gewirtz (1994). Griffiths and McLeod's (2008) review argues that the potential for using narrative analysis of educational practice to inform educational policy is relatively unexplored. Yet the authors do not discuss the applicability of narrative analysis to policy itself.

[6] Narrative policy analysis was developed to analyse policy problems and processes that are now characterised by complexity, uncertainty and polarisation (Roe, 1994), giving rise to 'wicked' problems, to which 'there are no "solutions" in the sense of definitive and objective answers' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 155). For a more extended treatment of this debate, see, for example, Torgerson (1986a, 1986b), Fischer and Forrester (1993), and Amy (1987).

[7] The UN Secretary-General convened a High Level Group chaired by the leaders of Indonesia, Liberia, and the UK to report to him on future development goals, in addition to the national consultations that were held in 88 countries worldwide between June 2012 and early 2013 (UN: Secretary General, 2012; UN: United Nations, 2013). The official consultation has expanded to encompass a series of online debating spaces convened by different arms of the UN (UN: System Task Team, 2012; UN: United Nations, 2012b); civil society networks (Concord Secretariat, 2013; GCAP: Global Call to Action Against Poverty, 2012); or policy research institutions (ODI: Overseas Development Institute, 2013). 15 draft SDGs were released for consultation in July 2014 (The Open Working Group for SDGs, 2014).

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