Policy and Power: The Formulation of the Education Strategic Plan of Ghana[1]

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Introduction

This article examines the power systems and spaces immanent in the primary findings of a qualitative research undertaken in response to calls to contribute to investigations on how global and national education policy processes interact in national contexts and on the exact nature of the roles and interactions of the policy agents (Ayamdoo & Ayine 2002; Monkman & Baird 2002; Little 2008). It presents part of the findings of a study that explores how a policy text, the *Education Strategic Plan 2003-2015* (ESP) of Ghana, is negotiated, produced and shaped when the Ministry of Education (MoE) and foreign donors interact. Drawing on notions of power expressed by Pierre Bourdieu (1990; 1991; 1992) and Steven Lukes (2005), it compares the spaces and positions which donors and the MoE occupy in the power geography. The article argues that power operating in the ESP formulation process through the MoE-donor interactions is a dominating and three-dimensional force (Lukes 2005). Its first dimension is the control over agenda setting, and the second is the authority exercised over the political agenda, which engenders decision or non-decision making by organising priorities into or out of the political process. The third dimension is the most potent and epitomises the less observable, hidden forms of power, which is also referred to as 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1991).

Power as one-dimensional – agenda setting

Findings show that there is more evidence of the donors rather than the MoE setting the agenda and determining policy priorities in the ESP shaping process. This authority of the donors over the MoE could be likened to the one-dimensional view of power. Lukes describes the one-dimensional view of power as a notion of power expressed through visible behaviour in a decision-making setting, where conflicts of interest occur, which indicates policy interests during political agency (Lukes 2005). This implies one party prevailing in a political contest of policy preferences over another. In order to subject this form of power to analysis, the researcher has to observe real behaviour either directly 'or by reconstructing behaviour from documents, informants, newspapers, and other appropriate sources' (ibid.: 17). Findings of the study that exemplify this one-dimensional form of power derive mostly from the latter kind of analysis.

Power as domination is seen in the act of agenda setting among donors with financial authority and an erosion of recipients' sense of agency. For instance, a donor official maintains that the effect of donor support on the MoE initiative has not been that positive:

> I would assess, I think it undermines their initiative. We have stifled their own initiative ... There has been too much setting the agenda over the last couple of years and I think that ministries are undermined ... because we have the money (**Interview**).

Findings which depict donors and not the MoE as significantly setting the agenda and leading the ESP text production process are evidence of donors' authority to name, earmark and legitimise because of their financial clout, approved knowledge authority and donor-initiated

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[1] The ESP text published in two volumes is 'a whole sector, or sector wide approach' to education development in Ghana (ESP I 2003: 4). It is 'an overview of education sector policies, targets and strategies for the plan period 2003 to 2015', and 'the Work Programme...presents the policy objectives in terms of targeted outcomes linked to timeframes and institutional responsibilities' (ibid.: 5).

global policy framework of Education for All (EFA) goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS): a macro policy prescription for Ghana. These engender donor domination which is recognised as an undermining, imposing and controlling attitude over the MoE in the MoE-donor interactions. While the observable actions of donors and the MoE show how the former are controlling agenda setting and determining policy preferences more than the latter, there are other indications which suggest that intangible or not readily observable interests are being stifled in the MoE-donor interactions. These are examined below in the context of the two-dimensional view of power.

Power as two-dimensional – authority over political agenda
The degree to which donors intentionally or unintentionally construct or reinforce impediments to the MoE's expression of policy disagreements suggests that the former have authority over the political agenda. Lukes maintains that every political entity tends to take advantage of, or approve of, certain types of conflict while repressing others, 'because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out' (Lukes 2005: 20). He sees the 'mobilization of bias' as a range of ideals, customs, practices and organisational processes that function constantly and methodically (ibid.). In a similar vein, one could argue that the global policy framework mobilises bias into decision-making in the MoE-donor interactions by organising priorities into or out of the policy process. For instance, findings suggest that donors coerce the MoE into complying with prioritising girl-child education by threatening to withdraw funds. Thus, while the girl-child issue is 'organized into' the politics of the policy process, the MoE priority of developing higher levels of education is partially 'organized out'. This form of power is analogous to the coercive type of power, which Lukes notes as: 'the securing of compliance through the threat of sanctions (ibid.: 21)'.

Nevertheless, the key focus of the two-dimensional view of power counters the behavioural aspects, which fails to consider that power may often be expressed through narrowing the span of decision-making to innocuous concerns (ibid.). For example, since some MoE officials allege that the MDGs and EFA goals are being used as an excuse to exclude particular concerns from the policy process, they claim that donors use these to justify neglecting other levels of education or not allocating funds to them at all. As one MoE official comments:

> It's true that basic education is the government's priority. Very often the donors tend to capitalise on this. They put too much emphasis on basic education and tend to neglect the other levels of education, especially tertiary education (**Interview**).

The ESP, which represents a plan for the entire education sector, is thus more biased towards primary education, one of the international and global agendas of the donors. A number of the interviews confirm that these global and donor agendas determine which policies must be prioritised within the education sector of Ghana. Since it is likely that the donor-initiated framework of EFA and MDGs predetermines the MoE-donor interactions and the MoE education policy priorities, 'nondecision-making' may have occurred. 'Nondecisions', which limit the range of decision-making, are themselves regarded '(observable) decisions'. Nondecision-making is a means of suppressing calls for transforming inequities within the prevailing order of things even before they are expressed (ibid.). While from the one-dimensional perspective what counts as a political concern in the MoE-donor interactions is determined by the observable donor agenda, the two-dimensional view helps to detect possible priorities that the restriction imposed by donor agenda has stopped from being fulfilled. Both forms of power discussed so far emphasise observable conflict, whether explicit or implicit, yet the third dimension does not.

Power's third dimension – symbolic violence: Prevention of grievances by shaping views.
The third dimension of power, also known as symbolic violence, challenges presumed consensus, and is a type that prevents grievances by shaping perspectives to secure compliance of the dominated. It suggests that power may not only be exerted in settings where (overt or covert) conflict is rife, especially when manipulation and authority as well as structural bias as forms of power tend to preclude it, but also in those where it is absent. Central to this form are the institution of political alliance and legitimate linguistic exchange that are normalised and therefore capable of attracting economic capital (Bourdieu 1991).

This form of power queries the assumption that if the MoE bears no complaints then its priorities are not undermined by the donor power being exercised. In fact, one main and most subtle effect of power is to prevent people from feeling aggrieved by shaping their views, thoughts and values in a manner that 'they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or … beneficial' (Lukes 2005: 28). For instance, the EFA goals, MDGs, the GPRS and the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), which represent components of the macro policy framework prescribed by the World Bank for Ghana, supported by other international donors (multilateral and bilateral) and to which the MoE have, in principle, signed-up, influence significantly the ESP formulation process. They have, probably, begun shaping subtly the thought processes and ways of seeing of the MoE as an institution.

Assertions by some MoE officials of the importance of the MoE priorities to conform to international/donor policy priorities in order to secure external funding, perhaps, marks the start of deliberate and unintentional subtle reshaping of the MoE perspectives. An instance is Ghana's proposal for inclusion in the EFA/Fast Track Initiative (FTI) through which the MoE hopes to secure donor funds to implement their ESP and attain the EFA goal of UPE. It may seem here that no conflict exists between donor and MoE priorities and that there has been no act of overt coercion of the MoE by the donors to adopt these priorities. However, the assumption that an agenda setting process devoid of grievances implies real consensus overlooks the possibility of phony consensus (ibid.). The issue of manipulation and authority without conflict emerges when donors' funding authority and commitments facilitate means that guarantee the MoE conformity.

Power's third dimension has the capacity to marshal, reproduce and strengthen structural bias not only maintained by personal actions, but also, most crucially, 'by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals' inaction' (ibid.: 26). Global policy agendas predetermine the MoE-donor interactions and MoE education policy priorities. These agendas rally, recreate and fortify structural bias in ways that appear to be the unintentional results of the choices of particular individuals. However, structural bias of the frame within which the MoE-donor interactions and the ESP formulation occur could be seen as not maintained merely by individuals but also by the social and cultural behaviour of groups and organisations like the donor agencies, the MoE and their communities all of which are steeped in the neoliberal agenda of global policies (ibid.; Stromquist 2002).

The way that international donor agendas and authority shape and contextualise the ESP formulation process and the MoE-donor interactions could be described as an instance of symbolic violence. This suggests that symbolic power in this context does not exist as a commanding or dictating force, but that it prevails within and by means of an approved connection between the dominating donor group and the dominated MoE in the context of the

configured field where (policy) knowledge to which language is central is (re)produced (Bourdieu 1991). What produces linguistic authority, the authority to uphold or undermine the social order, is the trust in the legitimacy not only of (policy) language, but also its users (ibid.). Donor-initiated global discourses, such as those articulated in the MDGs, EFA and GPRS documents have an approved linguistic status that is normalised, and are integrated into a national policy document such as the ESP to ensure political alliance between the MoE and donors. Using this legitimate, normalised language (for example, the EFA/FTI benchmarks to shape its education vision and set targets), the MoE could secure economic advantages from donors. The language of global policy documents symbolises wealth and authority. Its integration into the ESP text and EFA/FTI proposal endows both with an authority that yields donor approval and attracts donor funds.

Conclusion

This paper has compared the differential positions of power which the MoE and donors occupy in shaping the ESP. It has done so by seeing power as three-dimensional and symbolic, illustrated through donors controlling agenda-setting, wielding authority over political agenda and the third dimension of power which encapsulated structural bias, prevention of grievances, manipulation and authority. It has also demonstrated how the legitimisation of discourses or language maintains power imbalance between actors, thus revealing the inequality of power that exists between donors and the MoE. This power inequality seemed to be undermining designated aid effectiveness goals and partnership principles. However, the question of how feasible it is for there to be a balance of power between donors and recipients, when it is clear that the latter continue to depend financially on the former remains to be addressed.

It is, nevertheless, important to acknowledge that there are other possible interpretations of how power operates in the MoE-donor interactions. There has been criticism of the excessive portrayal of donor-recipient interactions as donor-dominated at the expense of the need to explore how power exercised by recipients through manipulation, for example, impacts donors and their international agendas (Little, 2008). However, the findings of the present study suggest that donors persistently occupy a dominant position in their relations with recipients with little or no financial authority, despite discourses advocating country-led partnership.

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