The hegemonic workings of the local partnership discourse in co-creation processeson the neighbourhood level

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Problem background

Local partnerships are today an important component of educational policy implementation. This is particularly true if it involves agendas that aim to address socially deprived communities and require the co-creation of local implementation strategies among multiple agencies. Yet, studies have frequently pointed out that local partnership policies fall behind their ambitions. Although we have substantial knowledge related to the problems and success factors of local partnership working, performance problems persist. Interestingly, research, policy and practice leave the partnership paradigm largely unquestioned; the main line of inquiry remains oriented (and sometimes only implicitly) towards improving the partnership management instead of questioning local partnerships as governance instruments. A few recent critical papers have started to look beyond this paradigm (e.g. Davies 2011, Moini 2011), however we still lack in-depth partnership studies that examine the micro-practices and internal dynamics of co-creating local implementation strategies (Davies 2011) to better understand the governmental workings of local partnerships.

Longitudinal ethnographic case study

The three-year ethnographic case study focused on the **co-creation of an implementation strategy in an education planning partnership on the neighbourhood level (PPN)**. The PPN was a sub-group of a wider multi-level education partnership in a deprived urban community in Germany which took place in an overall neighbourhood renewal context (2006-2013). It was an early case of community planning acoording to the 'educational landscapes' policy principles.

The 'educational landscapes' policy is a recent Post-PISA German policy framework that aims to create locally 'coordinated systems of education, care and support' (BMFSFJ 2005) through integrating formal and informal learning environments. It's what Maguire et al (2011) call a 'good idea' policy: a nationally high-profile and wide-ranging policy, yet with a low imperative and low specificity; a set of guiding principles that require considerable local interpretative work to adapt them to the local circumstances and needs.

Multi-level partnership structure

Top down → **Bottom-up**

Urban Planning Programme/ Exhibition 2013

Government Board

Local Project Board

Local Coordination Office (Executive)

Planning partnerships on the neighbourhood level (PPN)
Leaders from schools, youth organisations, early childhood organisations, adult education organisations, project coordinator (moderator) — Case-study

Theme-specific neighbourhood working groups | Neighbourhood plenaries

Local plenary of school principals in the region

Local plenary of all organisations in the community

Research Interest and Approach

How, and with what outcome, did the PPN actors co-create a partnership implementation strategy for their neighbourhood?

Following a strategy-as-practice approach with a discursive focus, the analytical attention lay on examining the co-creation of the situated strategic narrative during the partnership meetings with a focus on how the local partnership discourse informed these negotiations.

Special attention lay on the strategy-related consensus- and decision-making processes during the PPN meetings. Were they based on an integrated effort? What micro-political challenges arose in the actors' strategic positioning? How did the actors deal with them and with what outcome?

Methods

1. Audiorecordings — PPN meetings and related events (September 2006 – August 2009, n=20)

2. Interviews — interview — With each PPN member (t1: Summer 2007, n=11; t2: Summer 2009, n=9)

3. Documents — Policy documents, overall concepts, meeting minutes, strategic papers

4. Field Notes — Only selectively used to enrich data

Local partnerships as 'rationalised myths' (Meyer & Rowan 1977/1991)

Local partnerships can be understood as 'rationalised myths' (Meyer & Rowan 1977/1991), as taken-for-granted concepts with a 'technicalised' rationality which appears appropriate and modern. Myths give rise to new institutions and procedures and pressurise organisations to adopt them to remain legitimate. They provide a semantic roof for collaborations but also depolitise: they conceal their contradictory, little understood, contested nature and their strategic use by actors, shaping them along their interests.

Findings

A strategy was discursively achieved that was not integrated, but gave rise to additive community projects that left the core businesses of the involved organisations untouched. The strategy, proposed by the project coordinator (Co), favoured the logics and stakes of the schools and a big child, youth and family centre over those of the smaller organisations in the community whose topics, interests and problem-knowledge was largely left unused. Under the cloak of the neutral label 'community profiles', the implementation strategy took forward proposals which were already developed by the principals/the family centre in separate community programmes which 'merged' into this partnership. At the same time, the really contentious issues that initially led to big conflicts in the community were factored out and hierarchically dealt with outside of the partnership's reach. Community measures were implemented that reproduced the existing structures and conflict lines between the organisations in the community, while participation was slowly breaking away.

The 'local partnership myth' played an important role in this co-creation process as it shaped the local-situated decision-making in a twofold way: on the one hand it gave rise to the set-up of the partnership, yet under conditions that were contradictory and complex through a counter-productive structural reality in the 'shadow' of the project – outside of the partnership's reach. On the other hand the myth offered the PPN members the discursive resources for dealing with exactly this contradictory and complex reality: its managerial rhetoric helped veil these conditions by individualising the problems that arose from them whilst using the emotional affordance of the myth to exert moral pressure. Initiated by Co, a local-situated partnership narrative was hegemonically co-established that compelled the dissidents to comply by individualising the conflicts around Co's strategy, pressurising them by appealing to their good will to "discuss on the content-level" and come to a consensus. This narrative created a dual reality for the PPN actors in which they on the surface engaged in consensus-building but were underneath engaging in a hidden power-play. This legitimised the strategy-proposal of Co who unconsciously reproduced the hidden hierarchical outsourcing mentality that informed his role and the wider partnership set-up.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that due to their myth-character, co-creation processes in local partnerships are prone to hegemonic dynamics which might consolidate existing structures rather than generating structural innovation. They identify the prevalent managerial, veiled neo-liberal concept of local partnerships as part of the problem: it conceils a contradictory, hierarchical set-up of governance spaces through which the control (and metagovernance) remains within the government. Such new governance arenas are especially problematic when initiatives aim to address social inequalities, as they draw attention away from the actual causes of social inequalities (and even close down the discursive avenues to explore them), whilst placing partnership managers in a 'hamster in a wheel' position without the means to address the issues that needed to be addressed.

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