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

Dr. Stefanie Schmachtel
Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Department of Education and School Development

**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 deprived urban context (2006-2013). It was an early case of community planning according to the ‘educational landscapes’ policy principles

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 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.

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?

**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 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.

Contact:
Dr. Stefanie Schmachtel
stefanie.schmachtel@uni-jena.de

**Literature:**

**Case study**

**Urban Planning Programme/ Exhibition 2013**

**Government Board**

**Local Project Board**

**Local Coordinating Office (Executive)**

**Participation on the local level**

*Leaders from schools, youth organisations, early childhood organisations, adult education organisations, project coordinator (moderator)*

**Theme-specific neighbourhood working groups**

**Neighbourhood plenaries**

**Local plenary of school principals in the region**

**Local plenary of all organisations in the community**

**Methods**

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

2. **Interviews**
   - 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