

Exploring local governance in a German ‘educational landscapes’ partnership. An ethnographic case study of a collective strategy-building process from a cultural-historical perspective.

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Summary

This PhD thesis explores how local leaders from different institutional backgrounds in a partnership negotiated and co-constructed a strategy for the implementation of the German ‘educational landscapes’ policy in their neighbourhood. Drawing on a collective lens, this study focuses on the interplay between the actor’s positioning in the partnership discussions; it examines how their different logics of reasoning interact, counteract or act together (Lange, 2008) on a micro-interaction level and what process dynamic unfold when the common strategy is collectively created. Special attention lies on the strategy-related consensus- and decision-making processes. As the partnership structure of ‘educational landscapes’ initiatives is reasoned by creating synergy through actors bringing their expertise and resources together, this study asked how and whether the strategy-building process is based on an integrated concept-development effort. It explores the challenges and dilemmas that actors experience in the strategy-building process and highlights how they deal with them and what structural contradictions underlie them. Through its focus on the still underexplored micro-political processes, this study aims to generate implications that lie beyond the currently prevalent success and hindrance factors for implementing ‘educational landscapes’ (e.g. Maykus, 2010; Stolz, 2009; 2012; Tibussek, 2009) and shed light on the political character of this governance-based policy.

To approach these questions, this study applies a cultural-historical methodology. This theoretic tradition, rooted in the work of its Russian founding fathers Vygotsky and Leontiev, is based on a dialectical conception of learning processes and social change. It provided the necessary fine-grained conceptual tools to capture and analyse the complex empirical reality of these partnership processes and allowed highlighting their wider systemic dimension. In line with the recent strategy-as-practice research (e.g. Golsorkhi, et al., 2010), the cultural-historical perspective suggests focusing on the activities by which strategies are created and enacted. Based on understanding discourse thereby as a key means to the collective strategy-building, the co-constructed partnership narrative was used as an analytical window to the evolving strategy-building activity (cf. Collins, 2008; Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 2004).

This thesis is based on a longitudinal ethnographic case study in a German planning partnership on a neighbourhood level (henceforth: PPN) that aimed at implementing the ‘educational landscapes’ policy in their urban deprived neighbourhood. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of almost three years (September 2006 – August 2009) and began with the start of the project’s implementation in the neighbourhood. Interviews with the PPN members were conducted on two separate occasions, once at the beginning of the fieldwork in summer 2007 and again two years later in summer 2009. As an additional source of data, project-related documents were analysed.

The findings suggest thinking of 'educational landscapes' as 'rationalised myths' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977/1991), verifying a theoretical proposal by Stolz et al. (2011). This identifies them as institutional procedures that depict the underlying 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) as manageable. The myths veil their own ill-defined, contentious and incomprehensible character (Gaus, 2007) and conceal the existing power-structures. The analysis of the process data revealed the collective recontextualisation of the 'educational landscapes' policy into a concrete neighbourhood strategy as a hegemonic process in which the project coordinator played a key role. He set up the task, frame, and scope for the negotiations in the PPN and established his strategy-proposal based on a partnership narrative that concealed the contradictions that the PPN actors faced. This narrative rested on declaring the structural dimension of the conflicts between organisational leaders to a problem of the individual organisational leaders. It disguised that the project coordinator dealt with the contradictions in his position and task through passing them on to the local leaders. This resulted in a concealed power-struggle among the local leaders in the PPN that undermined the idea of integrated strategy-building, prevented innovation from happening, and reproduced existing power relations.

The findings criticise the prevalent managerial thinking that dominates the discourse around 'educational landscapes', and identifies them and related ideas such as 'partnerships', 'distributed leadership', even 'governance' itself, as primarily political problems. The analysis suggests that we need to address the contradictions and antagonisms that come to light in such implementation processes better, paying critical attention to the public and situated local narratives that reason such initiatives. They also propose questioning and rethinking the expectations connected to the vision of creating a local "coordinated system of education, care and support" (BMFSFJ, 2005). On a theoretical level, the iterative process of developing a suitable methodology and data analysis has pointed to a need to rethink the object in cultural-historical governance research towards a more critical stance that takes power and ideology more systematically into consideration.