Identifying Policy Puzzles for Discourse Analysis: The Vision of Education in the Promotion of International Development

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Abstract

This research brief outlines how I identified a policy puzzle that initiated a political discourse analysis. The brief, inspired by interpretive policy analysis that uses unexpected discoveries in policy fields as a precursor to deployment of the discursive approach, is divided into two parts. First, it shows how background research into a question about the ability of education to resolve development issues and reduce poverty in poor countries allowed me to unearth a policy dilemma in the field of international education. Driven by the question of whether education is a 'magic bullet' for development, I explore a critical debate about the methodological and theoretical basis of a dominant argument. Placed in the wider context of institutional goals, I explain how this conflicted dispute led me to an unanticipated discovery: that the vision of international education, previously thought of as a harmonious liberal pact, could actually be a narrative riven by tension over whether education was an economic good. The final part summarises the discoveries made and reflects on my breakthrough as a result of answering the initial question. I conclude by using the identified puzzle to generate a research question capable of guiding a discourse analysis into the torn vision of international education.

Keywords: *applied linguistics*, *discourse analysis*, *international education*, *policy analysis*

Introduction

The relatedness of language and politics has become more apparent through the field of discourse studies: an interdisciplinary juncture where the political-turn in linguistics meets the ideational turn in policy research. A prerequisite to undertaking a robust political discourse analysis is the identification of a significant policy puzzle. Yanow (2000) makes the point that puzzles often rest on the difference between what a researcher expects to find and what they actually experience from their primary contact with the policy field (p. 8). In other words, it is the dilemma that comes to light when the observed reality appears 'different' from that originally perceived. This article explains the initial research process I went through to discover such a mismatch in the literature on education for development. First contact with the puzzle was made whilst seeking an answer to a question that troubled me: What are some reasons why education might not be a 'magic bullet' for development and poverty reduction?

My expectation was that it would be difficult to find any logical explanations to contradict the notion of education as panacea for socio-economic problems in poorer countries. My previous reading of policy reports by international organizations and donor agencies seemed only to confirm what I thought was a global consensus: that education was a 'magic bullet' for national development. However, the challenge of the 'magic bullet' question forced me to take a critical view of these reports and explore a limited body of background literature. Answering the question enabled me to engage with two unforeseen aspects of the field of study. Firstly, that unquestioned support for education as a 'magic bullet' was in fact misguided. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, that these 'differences' were part of a wider and more fascinating policy puzzle about the vision of international education that could potentially be resolved through discourse analysis.

This essay is divided into two parts. The first part attempts to answer the 'magic bullet' question by surveying a small sample of institutional and academic research. It takes a careful examination of why arguments in support of education as a development remedy may in fact be mistaken, and critically assesses the empirical evidence that warned against educational expansion in low-income countries. The theoretical basis of the debate is critically examined along with relevant institutional issues that cast doubt on education as a 'magic bullet.' Part two reflects on how, in answering this question, my expectations of what I thought I would find were proven wrong. It also describes how this reconsideration of what I originally thought was 'right' generated a research question to guide a piece of discourse analytical research.

Answering the 'Magic Bullet' Question

Proponents of education as a 'magic bullet' provide a range of evidence for investment in schooling that is seemingly difficult to argue against given the moral nature of the issue. Improved productivity, increases in national income, economic growth, technological advances, and lower levels of inequality are all put forward as advantages of more education (Birdsall, Ross, & Sabot, 1995, p. 502). In addition, Rose (2006) suggests that education delivers a range of social benefits such as better health and reduced fertility rates (p. 163).

Claims that education can resolve poverty issues and boost development through economic growth are contested. At the heart of this controversy is the way that Rates of Return (RoR) analysis, a form of cost-benefit analysis commonly used by policy analysts, tends to produce evidence that contradicts the 'magic bullet' argument. Returns analysis is a favored analytical tool of researchers who explain education through Human Capital Theory (HCT), defined as the acquisition of skills and knowledge by individuals resulting in greater productivity that subsequently raises incomes and increases economic growth (Woodhall, 2001, p. 6951). That the policies of international institutions such as the World Bank and UN agencies are largely influenced by HCT is reflected in way they base investment decisions on economic reasoning (Bennell, 1996, p. 184).

Bullet Stuck in the Chamber: RoR

A major challenge to the 'magic bullet' argument questions the supposed impact of education on economic growth. This section examines how RoR analysis contributes towards doubts over whether education could resolve development and poverty issues.

Pritchett uses regression analysis to show that the estimated impact of years of schooling on GDP growth per worker is in fact small and negative (Pritchett, 1997, p. 6). These findings weaken the link between education and economic growth (Bils & Klenow, 2000, p. 1160). This trend was especially prevalent in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa where investment in education has not stimulated growth, as highlighted in literature that draws comparisons with the experience of East Asia. As Easterly (2002) points out, it is in this contrast that the lack of association between education and GDP per capita growth becomes most evident (p. 73). Figure 1 illustrates this comparison by presenting statistics for both regions. It shows that despite a huge education expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa relative to East Asia between 1960 and 1985, the former experienced only a fraction of the growth enjoyed by the latter.

Central to this argument is the distinction between the private and social returns to schooling which questions continued public investment in post-primary education. To return to Pritchett, RoR
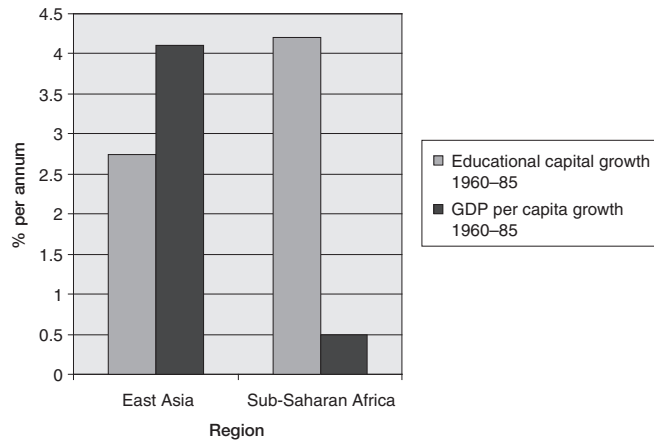
Figure 1. Where did all the education go in Sub-Saharan Africa? Source: Easterly (2002, p. 75).

analysis indicates that higher levels of education lead to higher wages but do not increase output or productivity and therefore will not result in GDP growth (Pritchett, 1997, p. 29). Therefore, although education attainment increases consumption and demand for consumer goods, a highly-skilled labor force will not be utilized to drive productivity and supply unless it can be put to work by a dynamic, entrepreneurial, and diverse economy. Education economists at the World Bank have used this evidence as justification to withhold donor funding beyond basic education in poorer countries (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002, p. 1). Such empirical evidence, supportive of HCT, enables the governments of powerful Western donors and international organizations to legitimise reductions in public spending on schooling, often accompanied by the promotion of private sector provision. Empirical evidence produced by RoR analysis challenged the conventional wisdom that education was a 'magic bullet' for promoting development. However, the validity and reliability of data used in returns estimates were themselves a source of controversy and brought these findings into dispute.

Dislodging the Jammed Bullet: Problems With RoR

Sampling errors, methodological discrepancies, and data reliability issues in returns analysis contribute towards undermining the above claim that education is not a remedy to underdevelopment. Since returns analysis is consulted in the policymaking process, it is only right that the validity of RoR and investment decisions based in these estimates be scrutinized.

In macro-level studies, the sampling frame can skew data and distort findings on returns to education. In many studies, a representative population sample at the household level was preferred to measure RoR. Although in reality, sampling procedures were often prone to an urban bias as they targeted large firms which resulted in the wages recorded being significantly greater than the average market wage (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002, p. 2). Many influential studies employing RoR that guided policy decision making repeated such sampling errors. Wages were further distorted in the way that formal sector employees contacted in samples only represented a small proportion of the overall labor market (Bennell, 1996, p. 188). Informal workers that made up the majority of the labor market in developing country studies were largely excluded. Furthermore, samples that focused purely on the formal sector tended to exclude female workers in low-income countries, many of whom are unwaged or work in the informal sector (Schultz, 2002, p. 208).

Methodological discrepancies have also been flagged up as being potential culprits of distortion, especially when estimating private returns to education. Mainstream education economists

argue that methodological errors occur when independent variables such as occupation are included in regression analysis, subsequently underestimating the impact of education on income (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002, p. 3). However, this position is contested by those who point out that other variables such as years of schooling, ability, and family wealth are important when calculating the wage function, and that excluding them can result in omitted variable bias (Bennell, 1996, p. 190; Schultz, 2002, p. 209).

The reliability of data used in RoR analysis has also been called into question. Without sufficient controls to guarantee data quality, out-dated and patchy census figures can feed into statistical calculations that influence key education indicators. Aggregated data used in World Bank studies has been accused of being misleading on the grounds of being poor quality, out-dated, and having parts of the data missing (Bennell, 1996, p. 186). On top of that, there is much controversy over inconsistencies between enrolment data, often collected by Education Ministries and incorporated into returns analysis, and actual attendance or completion data. Arguably, enrolment acts as an a ineffective proxy for human capital development as it ignores attendance and drop-out rates, thereby distorting growth rates upwards (Pritchett, 1997, p. 24). To muddy the waters of data reliability further, variability in the education systems of different countries reflected in the data can make comparability of data sets highly problematic.

Questions over the sampling procedures, methodological choices, and quality of data have all challenged the trustworthiness of RoR analysis and the credibility of its estimates. This casts further doubt on counter-claims disputing the notion that education can cure development ills. The next section explores the way that faith in RoR has been further eroded by challenges to the theory it substantiates.

Disarming the Assailant: Challenging HCT

Having examined controversies surrounding RoR analysis and its central place in the 'magic bullet' debate, the critical lens is turned onto its theoretical basis. A summary of the limitations of HCT in explaining educational problems is followed by the proposal of an alternative model that perceives education as a system of provision.

HCT has come under criticism from educationalists and development scholars who reject the idea of education as an economic good. Rose (2006) draws parallels with slavery in the way that the theory reduces individual workers to property (p. 174). It has been pointed out that HCT represents an un-opened 'black box' for education, offering no real analytical perspective on education and being limited only to cost-benefit analysis (Fine & Rose, 2001, p. 156). Rose (2006) adds that this macro-orientation results in a narrow focus on economic aspects of education which fails to take into account its moral, social and cultural impact (p. 167).

A major concern over HCT questions the faith it places in the neoclassical economic principle of obsessive methodological individualism which is then applied to a collective of self-maximising rational individuals. Perceiving education in this light, the theory misses social relationships as key elements of education, evades issues of historical and social specificity, and appears redundant in explaining why educational systems emerged and their evolutionary process (Rose, 2006, p. 174). In addition, HCT operates on the assumption of full employment and perfect information in markets, further detracting from its relevance to society and its imperfections. Its limitations in explaining education as an economic good are even acknowledged by World Bank staff. This is especially true in regards to the issue of education quality which researchers concede is difficult to measure at the

macro-level and can over-estimate the impact of schooling on growth (Pritchett, 1997, p. 32).

An alternative model suggests that it may be better to theorize education as a system of provision. This model is based on market imperfections and considers education provision as part of country specific socio-economic framework that rejects cost-benefit analysis of education such as RoR (Fine & Rose, 2001, p. 172). The focus of education as a system of provision is both economic and academic: building of schools, curriculum planning; committed to interaction of a social, political, economic and cultural nature; and concerned with relations, processes and structures in the social arena (Rose, 2006, p. 175). This approach arguably points to a more contextual model of micro-level country specific education evaluation and planning.

Together with RoR analysis, HCT could be perceived as a fundamental part of the unstable knowledge-generating machinery responsible for dismissing the 'magic bullet' argument. The dominance of this thinking on the wider institutional context is considered next.

Bullet Proof? Institutional Barriers Obstructing the Bullet

Institutional obstacles further prevent education from being a development cure and a means of poverty alleviation. Considering these barriers enables the 'magic bullet' debate to be located in the wider context of globally accepted goals that supposedly promote the role of education in the development process.

Major institutional targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) initiative reflect the findings of RoR analysis and guide the direction of international education policy. A key objective of EFA was to achieve universal primary school completion by 2015. Bennell (1996) argues that this over-emphasis on basic education is a result of RoR analysis conducted on behalf of the World Bank, a dominant actor in the goal-setting agenda, that vastly overestimates the social returns to primary schooling (p. 184). Others agree that the targets are too selective and divert attention away from adult literacy and higher education, considered by some as equally important for national development (King & Rose, 2005, p. 364).

Prescriptive targets in the MDGs and EFA initiative tend to overlook specific historical contexts. Providing a 'one size fits all' solution, they seem to overlook the fact that education underperformance in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia is linked with different starting points. In this manner, policies start to mirror the shortfalls of HCT, demonstrating a lack of historical and social specificity. Further criticisms of institutional targets claim that they reflect the inherent contradictions in neoliberalism. This is because the goals are shaped by World Bank recommendations and require expansionary fiscal policy to be achieved, yet the conditionalities attached to loans by the organization impose harsh restrictions on public spending in recipient countries (Marphatia & Archer, 2005, p. 3). This situation compounds the 'magic bullet' problem and prompts a potential rethink of more relevant targets and better planning of how they can be achieved.

In sum, widening the 'magic bullet' debate from a narrow focus on RoR analysis to make connections with institutional goals locates the argument in its global context. Doing so indicates that a set of dominant beliefs about education as an investment and an economic good possibly drove the argument that education was not a panacea for development. This prompts reflection on how the above debate feeds into a much larger policy puzzle and the implications this holds for a discourse analysis capable of exposing what lay behind the powerful norms in the field.

Summary and Reflection on the Identified Puzzle

Answering the 'magic bullet' question forced me to examine a wide variety of reasons why education alone may have been deficient in tackling underdevelopment and reducing poverty. The presentation of statistical evidence produced by RoR analysis about the weak impact of public spending on education at first seemed surprising. But the counterarguments, instead of restoring my faith in the 'magic bullet' claim, encouraged me to reflect on the power struggles going on between institutions, academics, and other actors that influenced the field. The dominance of neoliberal thinking caused a reconsideration over whether the meaning of the EFA targets was 'different' from what I had previously assumed. It is this process of reflection that transformed the 'magic bullet' debate into a gateway to a policy puzzle about the aspirations rival actors had for international education.

One of the most striking discoveries from studying the debate was that my perception of a functioning and harmonious liberal vision of international education had been tarnished. The dominant discourse about advancing the perfectibility of people, societies, and nations through international education now appeared to be a curious liberal façade. The ambitions actors had for education in improving the lot of people in poor countries were far from compatible; they were in conflict. Given the centrality of HCT in the debate, it appeared to me that the theory would be a key part of the puzzle. Solving it would entail interpretation using a larger sample of documents to grasp the extent to which HCT, and its underlying neoliberal ideology, had dominated the conflicted vision of education. Reflecting on these tensions generated the following research question: what was the vision driving international education during this period? With the puzzle identified, the initial research question in hand, and primary ideas about the theoretical framework, I could begin conducting a political discourse analysis.

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