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The ambiguous politics of teachers in the reconstruction of Iraq

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Abstract

The opportunity to rebuild community after conflict requires rapid responses to reinstall key institutions. This paper examines the role of educators in the reconstruction of educational systems and in the rebuilding of community through a case study of Iraq. While ongoing conflict continues in Iraq, reconstruction efforts persist through large scale infrastructure and institutional rebuilding that aims to bring stability to political, legal and financial systems. The interim Iraqi government, given sovereignty on June 28, 2004, continues to support the road map underpinning rebuilding efforts in Post-Saddam Iraq.1 The restructuring of education systems is a cornerstone of rebuilding efforts since an intact and functioning education system complements other social and economic transformations, rebuilds social relations and instigates a routine normalcy to post conflict communities. The paper problematises rebuilding efforts through critical policy analysis that questions the nature of policy, how assistance is constructed and the ambiguous political role of educators in educational rebuilding.

new policy and new education

Analysing educational policy dealing with the current context of Iraq provides a challenge to the education researcher. The search for information from which to critically evaluate educational policy and practice in this current situation is limited as is reflective material dealing with educational intervention in conflict situations. Davies similarly states that,

the link between conflict and education is a grossly under-analysed area. This is not surprising, as it is uncomfortable for policymakers and curriculum developers. It is safer to focus on literacy and numeracy, on the number of desks and the achievement of measurable targets.

The information from press releases, policy documents from international aid agencies such as USAID, and governmental reports are presented as uncontested achievements of educational and social rebuilding. However, rebuilding whole communities after conflict is a chaotic and trouble ridden process that brings into play a conundrum of social and cultural issues as rebuilding shifts from immediate relief to longer term reconstruction.
In order to enhance understanding of the roadmap of reconstruction and to critically evaluate the policy stances driving urgent rebuilding efforts, it is necessary to understand what is incorporated in the process and who is involved. For example, the contract to rebuild primary and secondary education has been outsourced by USAID to Creative Associates International for $US 37.9 million. As education researchers we need to ask questions about those responsible for educational rebuilding and the strategic role they occupy in redesigning education. In order to reduce academic lag in this critical field, the researcher positions the work of educational policy analysis as a public interest and argues that as public intellectuals, educational researchers have responsibility to critically evaluate educational policy in the making and from sources available. Therefore, this paper raises issues and problematises the developments of education policy in Iraq and the strategic role of educational actors reconstructing the new regime in Iraq.

Uncovering Politics and Power in Reconstruction Policies

Education policy has been extensively defined as a part of a process that controls educational development, as a complex process that allocates values, as ways to legitimize political decisions and as the fusion of social, political and economic interests. However, a more pragmatic definition comes from the World Bank, which defines policy as sets of guidelines controlling how monies are allocated and the process that would be put into place to disburse monies. The World Bank definition of policy suggests that policy enables infrastructure, supports specific goals and outcomes, checks work and money flows, and ensures some quality control. This functional definition of policy focuses on the outcomes and achievements of distributed funds rather than arguing for particular value-based positions. When examining reconstruction progress in Iraq, the largest lender of reconstruction monies for education is USAID. Under the banner of security, democracy and prosperity, the Strategic Plan 2004-2009 states:

... The United States will work side-by-side with the Iraqi people to build a free, democratic, and stable Iraq... Our goals are for Iraqis to take full control of their country as soon as possible and to maintain its territorial integrity. We will assist the Iraqi people in their efforts to adopt a new constitution, hold elections, and build a legitimate government based on the consent of the governed and respect for the human rights of all Iraqis.

Under the broad agenda for stability and democracy, reconstruction policy is viewed as 'assistance', that is, assistance to achieve stability and democracy through financial support of key infrastructure and institution building. Considering USAID is primarily a funding agency then the term 'assistance' represents monetary aid used to rebuild governing institutions.

The strategic assistance reads like fact sheets of outcomes and expenditure while the ideological constructs of democracy and stability are presented as uncontested values. Policy highlights the outcomes of monetary assistance and the impact this makes on social rebuilding. Monetary aid in educational rebuilding includes,

... Over 2,405 schools have been rehabilitated, 33,000 secondary school teachers trained and 8.7 million textbooks printed and distributed.

... Twenty-five Fulbright grantees and over 20 Iraqi high school students are studying in U.S. educational institutions. ... The first "American Corner" opened in Iraq, including hundreds of books about the U.S., a video and DVD library,

Internet connected computers and videoconferencing capabilities.

By focusing on policy as a way to guide the distribution of monies and not contesting the underlying values, a confident vision of reconstruction and achievement is presented.

rebuilding education

That education plays a critical role in social transformation is not a new concept. However, Post-Saddam Iraq presents policy makers with an opportunity for social and civic reconstruction where transformative capacity of education is fully exploited. Reconstruction literature stresses the importance of rebuilding education as a way to assist social rebuilding. Tawil explores conflict situations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Guatemala, Lebanon and
Mozambique, Northern Ireland, Rwanda and Sri Lanka arguing that meaningful reforms need to unpack the complex relations between school, society and change. Duggan's experience of the reconstruction of the Cambodian education system is interesting to consider. In that case, reconstruction of the education sector created a culture of economic and social dependency of those seeking assistance. Duggan and recent work by the author have demonstrated how the economic interests of global organizations impact on the restructuring of national education systems. The World Bank's lending policies, conditional on specific structural changes, have been severely criticized by educators and researchers. In the case of US assistance to Iraq, consider the assistance of USAID with its two pronged policy that assists but also dominates:

USAID's Year 1 Education Program

Notes

1 The interim Iraqi government has set a date of 30 January 2005 for its first nationwide election.

2 This paper was originally presented at the European Education Research Conference, Crete 2004. The audience discussion revealed teachers' experiences and the issues they had in shaping new curriculum and practices.

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