Political Utilities of Participatory Discourse in Education-Agency in (in)action in Post-Crisis Aceh

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2014

Presented on behalf of the IS Academie at Conference of the British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE) September 2014 Bath, UK.
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Abstract

Much of the conventional research and policy regarding global education is based in ‘positivist, reductionist, and deterministic understandings based on mapping clear cause’ (Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2014) that fail to properly address the complex intercourse between agency, structure, discourse, and power. This research attempts first to explicate the intended purpose and methods of decentralization of education in Aceh, Indonesia and secondly, to use critical realism and associated frameworks as modalities of obscuring and reproducing extant power structures on multiple scales. A focus on the way extent structures (cultural, political, and economic) confine or create arenas of agency and on the inherent utility of hegemonic discourse are used to partially explain outcomes of Acehnese and Indonesian participatory education reforms thus far.

Introduction

Despite rapid economic growth and global influence, the state of education in Indonesia on the national level remains vastly incongruous to the economic indicators. Indonesian students consistently score among the lowest in Math and Science among all studied countries in 2003 (Firman and Tola 2008), and recently scoring significantly below the OECD average, ranking 64 out of 65 in math, reading and science (OECD 2014). Considering the scale of the Indonesian education sector that operates more than 170,000 primary schools and 25,000 junior high schools across 33 provinces, and serves over 40 million children (Vernez et al 2013), this is a disheartening reality.

Decentralization of all public sectors including education began in the 1990s spurred by public discontent and criticisms of the perceived over-centralization of
the government. (Amirrachman et al 2009; Bandur 2009). With widespread global precedence, traditional centralized powers have been deconcentrated to sub-national levels. The practice of School Based Management (SBM) has been implemented for the purpose of integrating the participatory process into the sphere of education. SBM is premised on the notion that democratization is mutually beneficial for both the development project and local beneficiaries.

However, localized democratization is contradictorily implemented through global pressures by which the most powerful actors exert disproportional influence. Both the design and implementation of educational policy and pedagogics occur externally and can be applied uncritically at both the national and sub-national levels of developing nations. Critics consequently argue that educational reform and investment are not motivated by educational significance but on returns on investment (Robertson and Dale 2013). Through the standardization of externally derived education policy, spurred on by the power of discourse, the role of the market is extended and that of the nation-state reduced (Ibid.).

Central to the SBM model and this research, the school committee is meant to be the local manifestation of participatory education. In Indonesia, school committees (komite sekolah) operate as an advisor and facilitator for the implementation of a school’s educational policy. The SC exists as the primary avenue for participation for parents, the community, and other relevant stakeholders. Importantly, they are also given responsibility for fiscal oversight of BOS grants and scholarships (Bantuan Operasional Sekolah known as BOS grants are based on a fixed per pupil calculation), mediating between the community, school and government, and the duty to ensure transparency and accountability at the school (Vernez et al 2013).

Aceh specifically is a region marred by a history of prolonged ethnic conflict and recent natural disaster. The cessation of armed conflict occurred only after the devastating boxing day tsunami of 2004. Aceh now finds itself in a dynamic post-conflict and post-disaster ‘moment’ (Lopes Cardozo and Shah forthcoming) occurring in a political context of decentralization that has transformed the political
landscape of the region. Concurrent with the national restructuring, Aceh has systematically implemented participatory reforms in education. A long history of autonomy coupled with special political, cultural, and economic sovereignty makes Aceh a dynamic, complex, and potentially promising context from which education decentralization and SBM reforms may be.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical realists contend that mechanistic-type models of state power must be consistently reformed due to the natural dynamics and complexities of actual states and that the means by which legitimacy is assured is contextually and historically distinct. Actors, whether states, institutions, or individuals, navigate a complex political, economic, and social environment that is never stagnant, but full of ‘contradictions and movements’ (Jessop 2006).

The current restructuring and development of new arenas of civic and governmental agency has created tensions and conflicts of interest between and within actors and institutions regarding authority and power. Brenner (2009) describes the contentious and evolving nature of institutions:

> State space never entails the creation of a ‘blank slate’ on which totally new scalar arrangements could be established, but occurs through a conflictual layering process in which emergent rescaling processes collide with and only partially rework inherited landscapes of state scalar organization. (2009, p 134).

Via the paradigm of critical realism, this research attempts to broaden the scope of analysis to view how actors work in relation to their context using the example of decentralization and the implementation of participatory education reforms.

In an attempt to place education reforms in Aceh amid a larger spacio-temporal, economic, and social context, the strategic relational approach (SRA), in conjunction with original research, is used to emphasize actors, whether individual or institutional. This research focuses on several examples of the political utility of
participatory discourse as a means of agency, in the reproduction or transformation of individual and shared realities.

The strategic relational approach (SRA) conceptualizes structures as strategically selective in form, content, and operations and regards actions as structurally embedded (constrained), context-sensitive, and structuring. Jessop’s approach shows how structures and agents act on strategies that privilege some strategies, actors, identities, and spatial-temporal horizons in their reproduction. It also leaves room for reflexivity by both structures (capable of agency) and agents (capable of structuralization) in subsequent reproduction or transformation (Jessop 2006).

The efficacy of strategic action is contingent on access to resources and knowledge, where those lacking such access face significant impediments compared to those with access. It is in this framework that Hay defines power- the ability to shape contexts in which actors formulate strategy. Naturally, structural constraints imposed by actors with higher levels of structuralization, whether intentional or unintentional, establish the ability of the relatively powerless to engage in meaningful influence or strategic action (Hay 2002).

The dynamic environment, composed of institutional frameworks, history, culture, power, and economics, form the encompassing contingency called the strategically selective context (Hay 2002), in which actors form strategic calculations and engage in strategic action. Access to knowledge and resources influence the efficacy of particular actions to reproduce or transform the strategically selective context. Strategic selectivities are the potential avenues of strategic action, actor-specific, that are utilized according to the current evaluations in the strategic selective context as a whole.

**Discursive considerations**

The discourse of participation in the developmental contexts seems to have saturated the policy and practice of development agencies, NGOs, governmental
organizations, and local communities as a response to criticisms of traditional top-down development (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In conjunction with the almost universal uptake of externally developed participatory reforms by developing countries, critical theoretical concerns have been voiced. Many of these concerns culminated in Cooke and Kothari’s *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001). Post-structural and critical theorists contend that issues of power, privilege, and coercion must be brought to the foreground and be recognized as these themes intrinsic to participation and education practices.

Parfitt (2012) defines discourse as a ‘field or body of knowledge constituted by a power relation’ that is likely to mirror the meanings and interests conferred on it by elite groups. It is the purpose of the critical discourse analyst to investigate ‘the role of discourse in the challenge and (re)production of dominance’ (van Dijk 1993). Central to many theorists conceptions of power and language are ‘floating signifiers.’ It is in this concept that the elements of participatory discourse (participation, community, democracy, to name a few) gain their potent discursive capital. These high valence words maintain subjective and idiosyncratic meanings that cannot be dissociated from things like class, race, gender, age, ideology, etcetera (Anderson 2006), rendering them definitionally meaningless, yet symbolically potent. Invariably, problems arise from the ambiguity of such discourse and their potential to homogenize, essentialize, and obscure power relationships within and among individuals, communities, and institutions (Reynolds 2000; Guijt and Shah 2001). Such discourse is central to the actions of institutions and actors and are at least tangential, if not culpable, to many of the barriers to transformative outcomes in participatory, decentralized education reforms.
Strategic Selectivities and the Political Utilities of Discourse: Control, Legitimization, Collusion and Co-optation

The latent power inherent in any form of discourse may manifest in action through individual, group, or institutional agency, extending beyond participation in practice (Anderson 2006; Anderson 1998; Malen 1994). I refer to these mechanisms as political utilities (Weiler 1993); avenues of strategic action, derived from the field of strategic selectivities given a particular strategically selective context. This research focuses on four of such ‘political utilities:’ 1) co-optation, 2) collusion 3) legitimation and 4) control.

**Control** - Participation as a mechanism of control is put forth by Barker (1993) and reiterated by Anderson (2006) and Malen (1994). They propose that participatory policy in organizations represents a disciplinary practice as it obfuscates the source of control while simultaneously increasing it (Barker 1993; Anderson 2006). Sumintono (2009 cites McGinn and Welsh 1999) defines decentralization of regulation as a framework that is used to ‘constrain and shape decisions and behaviors of [the] organizations members.’ Barker calls this ‘concertive control.’ Associations, committees, and contracts channel participation in predictable ways and are established community structures that mirror familiar bureaucratic structures (Cleaver 2001). Cooke (2001) aptly calls this the ‘domestication of dissent,’ which restricts participation to pre-determined arenas. He contends that the spread of participatory reforms represents the spread of managerialist and neoliberal thinking from the private sector to NGOs, donors, and state bureaucracies and reflects the idea that a single technocratic approach can be applied universally to all contexts.

**Co-optation and Collusion** - Through the process of co-optation, lesser organizations are incorporated into pre-existing institutions and/or adopt pre-formed top-down policies. By incorporating less powerful, smaller, or marginalized
groups, it may simply draw them closer to the structure by which they are subjugated; the very act of inclusion as a participant can be seen as an extension of power by another (Kothari 2001).

The appropriation (co-optation) of education models from above, i.e. adopting a externally formulated system from above such as SBM, plays a ‘direct and functional’ role in global capital accumulation (Dale and Robertson 2006).

Furthermore, participatory structure often becomes arenas that foster collusion among dominant groups with similar interests. Bacharach and Botwinick (1992 cited Anderson 2006) describe the inegalitarian nature of participatory system that tends to benefit the rich over the poor and the active of the apathetic. This trend manifests itself clearly in the ostensibly electoral process of SBM on the local level.

**Legitimation and conflict management** - Legitimacy is defined as the ‘normative basis of authority’ (Weiler 1993) supported by its ‘symbolic rightness’ (Malen 1994). While the state maintains the precarious task of maintaining control while maintaining or enhancing legitimacy, often, maintaining control results in a loss of legitimacy and vice versa (Weiler 1993). Decentralization legislation tends to arise from political turmoil at all levels of a government (Sumintono 2009) and is rooted in a state’s ongoing need to legitimize itself (Weiler 1993; Malen 1994). Decentralization functions as a means by which the state maintains or increases control by means of utilizing populist and democratic discourse rooted in the ‘high-valence’ rhetoric like community, democracy, and participation. Participation is used to foster legitimacy on multiple scales, from global organizations, to the central government down, and horizontally from the school to stakeholders in the community. On the local and national scales, implementation of SBM fosters an air of systematic and responsive democratization. This process of legitimization may be paramount to actual outcomes. This is suggested by the weak empirical warrant SBM (Malen 1994; Heyward 2010).

An additional benefit of decentralized policy is the addition of parallel structures through which conflict may be diffused by the existence of additional tiers of
insulation. These layers protect the central government or school management from ‘contentious interaction’ and unpopular decisions (Weiler 1993; Malen 1994). By incorporating large and diverse groups of people into the foundation of a project or policy, people involved are deemed to be determinates of the success or failure, whether or not the participants are directly involved. The burden of success is therefore effectively transferred from the macro-level or meso-level to the micro-level, and in the process the government, or implementing organization, has distanced itself from failure (Williams 2004). In sum, these reforms may be enacted more for their utilitarian properties than their substantive viability (Malen 1994).

**SBM implementation in Indonesia- Synopsis of recent results**

A recent study sponsored by the World Bank (Vernez et al 2013) has provided the most comprehensive analyses yet of the state of SBM in Indonesia. Carried out in 2010 and 2011 it is a national comprehensive study of the current state of SBM implementation and its effects in Indonesia. Though Aceh and Papua are conspicuously absent, the results of the findings correlate with those uncovered in Aceh and can be the result of the political utilities described in the theoretical discussion. The results will be of use to bolster the findings in the following analyses of the findings in Aceh.

![Figure 8: Summary of findings- Vernez et al 2013](image-url)

| • Reluctance of schools to make independent decisions. Uniformity of stated goals and plans of action |
| • High level of influence of districts in managerial/programmatic decisions (including textbooks and curriculum) |
| • SC members meet rarely and are not actively involved in BOS allocation, school mission setting, and |
development of annual plan

- Committee chair often signs off, as per government regulation outlined in the 2003 decree, to decisions already made
- Lack of socialization of stakeholders
- Parental attitude of deference to school staff
- Meetings involving parents are rare
- Little information on BOS allocation is received by parents or SC members
- Half of SC members report that schools’ sharing of information is inadequate or non-existent
- Actual amount of government funding received by schools varied greatly.
- Schools that offer opportunities for parents to file complaints and that were responsive to parents’ opinions are associated with greater expenditure of discretionary funds spent on instruction
- So far, the implementation of SBM may not have resulted in any major changes in school practices (Vernez et al 2013).

Though Aceh was not a part of this particular national study, the results coincide with the results of this study, as well as similar studies conducted in Aceh (see Sweeting et al 2007; Pradham et al 2013).

**Cultural and Socio-economic constraints on individual agency**

Perceptions and behaviors of actors towards the decentralization process and participation in SBM reflect the complexity of the social realities. This includes the effects of the highly centralized past of Indonesia. Notions of a model citizen have been systematically ingrained in the preceding decades, including strong respect of
the social order from a socio-spatial position, as much defined as much from above as below (Bjork 2003). Amirrachman et al (2009) note:

- tensions... accompanied community participation. In the Indonesian context, the tensions seemed to have stemmed both from the legacy of centralization and the socially complex nature of Indonesian society including a certain deference to higher authority (Amirrachman et al 2009 cites Amal 1994; Bjork 2003).

These historically born cultural nuances have led to a reluctance among participants at all levels, beginning at the most basic levels of parental engagement with schools. This predilection in Acehnese society not to ‘rock the boat’ and the culture of deference present throughout the country results in the inability of the marginalized to address their socio-economic or cultural superiors and engage in the participatory process. Power relations were directly felt and experienced by parents in a number of instances. The following dialogue took place with one of the two respondents who were recipients of the BOS scholarship for low-income families at CS1:

R- Are you able to voice your concerns? Why or why not?
P- Since the committee conducts a meeting every 6 months, I get access to tell my aspiration(s) through the meeting. However, I have never delivered it yet because I find it difficult to do it verbally in a meeting as I am not brave enough.

R- Do you feel part of the school community?
P- I do not feel that I am part of the school community because I feel some gaps amongst parents and social class. I consider myself as a person from low social class so it’s not easy to interact with people from a higher social class. On the other hand, I do not think that aspiration from low class people’s opinions would ever be heard, and this happens everywhere including in the villages.*

The MoNE official reiterated the these sentiments:

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* The * symbol is used to indicate that the interview has been translated from the original Bahasa Indonesia by a research assistant in the field. In quotations where the participant is not identified by the primary role, dialogue will organized by ‘R’-researcher and ‘P’- participant
R-Could a parent show up and say 'I want to be a candidate'?  
MoNE-Its very rare, and its Acehnese culture not to impose yourself

The respondent from the low-income family explained further how that in the meetings, even parents coming from the same working background do not interact. There is no formal process for engaging marginalized people in the community. The inclusion of working class or marginalized people is contingent on a principal or SC committee that is active, sympathetic, and effective. Both a top MoNE official and an MPD official explain:

R- Specifically regarding the parents and the committees, are there any ways to engage those parents?  
MoNE- if the committee is active yes, if it is then there is opportunity to do so. First of all, these poor people do not know their rights. For example he doesn't know that his kids have the right to scholarship, he doesn't know there is a block grant to make sure there kids go to school, or their right to take part in the committee. They don't know it if the committee isn't active. That's why we expect an active community through the selection of good committee

MPD1- It al depends on whether the, those involved in the SC are active or not. If they are active then the community is involved

The BOS grants seemed further to foster the historical air of deference and indebtedness of recipients towards the SC or extant institutions. One BOS scholarship recipient stated that though he ‘does not know where to go if I have complaints. I am just happy to have the scholarship.’ Another reported that ‘The school does not involve all parents in decision making process thinks ‘it is the school’s job to make policies.’ When asked about the effectiveness of the school committee he responded:

'I think the school committee has been achieving its goal as additional needs of the students are already fulfilled by using the fees.'

But added the caveat:
'Some of the fees should be allocated to provide more textbooks to the library so that the library will have enough number of textbooks to be borrowed and used by every student in the class.'*

This implies that the respondent chose not to engage with the SC on the issue of textbooks, a notably important issue, because he believed that the SC has already fulfilled their obligations, to him and the school, by the covering of his school fees.² Sumintono et al (2012) argue that the existence of only high-profile figures in the SCs makes some parents hesitant to confront the community figures.

This reluctance exists among all participants in the decentralization and SBM process resulting in a lack of active and meaningful participation on multiple levels. This begins with the parents’ reticence to actively engage the school, as the participants have described and the schools reluctance to make decisions independent of the traditional bureaucracy (Vernex et al 2013). Both are limited by aspects of the selective strategic context regarding history and culture.

The SC committee does not hold a parallel authority to the school as is intended by the decree. In fact the decree can be interpreted to place the SC below the school in which it is situated (Sumintono et al 2012). This results in ‘a persistence of centralist culture and the reluctance of the SC to assume further power’ (Amirachman 2009) and is demonstrated by the results of the 2013 World Bank study summarized previously. The strong culture of deference and bureaucracy makes these barriers to authentic and effective participation difficult to overcome. Bjork (2003) quotes Donald Emerson:

democratizing Indonesia [means] trying to dismantle a system of fear and favor, deference and influence, talent and venality, by turning its own elements against it—elements that for three decades have been used to entrench it (2003, p 212).

² The monthly allocation of 30,000 IDR by the BOS scholarship translates to roughly 2.50 USD at the time of writing.
Cultural barriers are not the sole factor implicated in the messy and uneven implementation and lack of authentic participation in SBM across Indonesia. Much of the disparate outcomes result from the economic and social realities between geographic (or economic) regions.

*Socio-economic barriers*

:CS1 was regarded as a high-achieving and high-class. The ‘high-class’ reputation of the school caused hesitation among parents of lower classes apply for their children, a parent and lecturer at the nearby university remarked:

‘There is a lot of talk and rumors from the society this year. For example, before when they recruit [admit] new students…a lot of parents come to me about, 5 or 6 parents, came to me and ask, they complain that this school just for lecturers’ kids. I told them no… there are a lot of rumors that this school is just for high class [families].’

The rumors circulated by parents regarding this case study may not be unfounded. She explains how student admittance worked in previous years:

‘When my oldest registered at that school and then they did not conduct a test. They just select a student based on the data of parents’ occupation, address, etcetera.’

According to the respondent, her daughter was eventually accepted because of the respondent’s prominent position as a lecturer at the nearby university. She continued to press the administration to make change. Now, she says, the school has test-based admissions policy. Though this modality presents it’s own problems (working class people do not have the resources or impetus to send their children to early/pre-school education), it is one of the few direct cases where policy has been changed at the behest of a protesting parent. This issue was only solved when addressed by a highly educated university lecturer, who, by chance, found herself in the position that is typically experienced only by the poor and uneducated. The lecturer, uncharacteristically by Acehnese standards, was not afraid to ‘rock the boat.’
The exclusion of children from low-SES background via collusionary exclusion is a strategic action utilized by school management and confers a number of benefits for the school and the students fortunate enough to attend. In the free-choice model, where school funding is based strictly on a per-pupil basis, and where a proportion of school discretionary funds are contingent on parental donations, it would be advantageous to both maintain a reputation of ‘high-class,’ and recruit only students of means or academic excellence. There is never a dearth of applicants at CS1 according to one respondent. The benefits are not only economic, but families of the students typically have high standing in the community (such as lecturers at the university or local political figures) and are not only more involved in their child’s education, but provide linkages necessary for increased attention to the school’s well-being and effectiveness, and potentially the capacity of the SC. Such segregation of those with economic and social capital may lead to a feedback loop in which economic and academic disparities between schools are increased. In any case, where economic and social polarization occur, this may lead to increasingly divergent learning outcomes in the neo-liberal model.

**Co-optation**

Co-optation appears at multiple levels of examination and in both of the forms discussed in the theoretical framework (institutionalization of lesser organizations and adoption of top-down policy). It is interesting to note the co-optation occurring in two directions. From the adoption of decentralization policy from above that reflects the global discursive zeitgeist, and the co-optation of institutions developed locally into the national framework. The most large-scale of such, described in the theoretical framework, is represented by the adoption of decentralization policy and subsequent decentralization of the education sector nationwide. The occurrence of co-optation of locally developed institutions such as the school committee model developed in Aceh in 1990 and the Education Council (MPD) upwards to the national level represents co-optation via institutionalization within the national framework. A high-ranking member of MoNE explains the origins and co-optation of the original equivalent of the SC:
MoNe1- The first idea was from Aceh with the school council, which was different than the BP3 (original national corollary to the SC). The school council involved all of the community around the school, including businessmen who want to participate in the school, and the government saw that the concept is much better than the BP3 so the government adopted it. So it came from Aceh and was adopted on the national level and they changed the name to komitee sekolar [school committee].

The MPD was similarly a particularly Acehnese creation, formed in 1990 by the decree of the Governor of Aceh no. 420/435/1990 (Mpd-aceh.org) that was adopted by the national system in a similar fashion in the 2003 regulation. It is known in other provinces simply as an Education Council (World Bank 2011). The MPD is ostensibly a CSO, but is now one that is mandated via government policy and the extent to which its authority begins and ends (Sumintino 2009) as well as its embeddedness and autonomy given its place in the government structure is uncertain. The institutionalization of these organizations into the national structure means that they are now bureaucratically constrained and beholden to policy developed from non-local and more powerful actors.

Co-optation and SC agency

Perceptions regarding the implications on committee autonomy regarding the later form of co-optation (institutionalization) varied widely between respondents:

One Committee head responded:

‘With this regulation they [the SC] has more authority because the funding from the government that flows to schools they have to know where the funding is spent. So they have more authority now than before.’

The MoNe official opined:

The concept is similar with the school council and school committee but now the Acehnese have to follow the policy of the national government...

Finally, the primary contact at the MPD offered an alternative perspective:
MPD1- (Before) there were no school committees and no BOS funding. They were called BP3, but some people say BP3 was an association of parents that’s bottom up. Bottom-up organization. They came from parent initiatives… unlike the current school committees

R- It formed organically? And wasn’t mandated?

MPD1- Yes organically, of course…the goal was more on controlling the schools… they were more democratically elected because they didn’t have to be close to the principal and there was no BOS funding.

R- Were they able to make a difference in the schools?

MPD1- Unlike a school council, the principal may not know who the members will be…they were separate from the schools…they unify themselves and they meet regularly and they elect their chairman…Then, after the reformasi in the early 2000s they made all this regulation about school committees and the climate of the school

R- It became institutionalized…

MPD1- Yes, it became institutionalized, and that can make the committees weak because it is part of the system. In the case of the BP3 they were self-funded. In the case of SC they have no funding except for the BOS. That’s why they need to be close to the school principals in order to get a project.

The opinion expressed by the MPD member is not without precedence. The 2007 study by Sweeting, Furaıdah, and Koes supports the assertion that the role of the SC diminished and weakened as the SC has lost its role as a primary fundraiser. As the school committee has been absorbed into the institutional structure, its authority has been eroded along with its autonomy and agency. Such is the tendency of co-optation from above. In many cases, the transition towards a more market-based system disadvantages less powerful institutions (Amirrachman 2003) such as the schools committee. External constraints have been imposed by more powerful actors, limiting particular strategic selectivities of the less powerful.

Though the BOS grants have broadly been a success in diminishing tuition payments and broadening and stabilizing a schools capital flow, they have in some respects resulted in the erosion of autonomy and authority of SCs. One SC member in the 2013 Vernez et al study remarked that meetings between parents and the SC no longer occur because the students do not pay tuition. Another reported that there is
no SC activity without the direct consent and participation of the principal and the data collected during the course of this study suggests this pattern is consistent with Aceh.

Through the SRA lens, we have now seen both the organic creation of a structure by agents on lower sub-national and local scales (creation of the original school committees and MPD in Aceh) and the large scale institutional agency expressed when the committees are brought into the institutional fold through a strategically-selected process of co-optation. The process at once legitimizes the co-opting institution while confining the co-opted into prescribed boundaries of agency. The opinions expressed by the MPD member imply forms of concertive control on two levels: the meso-level institutionalization and the micro (school) level oversight and control of committee actions.

**Collusion**

As mentioned previously, participatory structures have the potential to often become arenas that promote collusion among dominant groups with similar interests. Bacharach and Botwinick (1992 cited Anderson 2006) describe how these structures tend to benefit the existing holders of power - the rich over the poor, the active over the passive, and in Aceh, men over women. Sweeting et al (2009) show that males dominate committee demographics in Indonesia, are of existing authority in the community, and are often appointed. This prevalence of males was apparent in the committee demographics of the SC at CS1, where only the principal and the secretary were females, while the remaining 22 members were males. This is an interesting finding because it is primarily mothers who are directly involved in the day-to-day goings on of the child’s education and due to the fact that the vast majority of teachers at the primary school level are female (Sweeting et al 2009). There is no mandate in the original decree that guarantees the representation of particular demographics. One parent remarked that:
‘The four candidates in the election of the head of school committee are more or less from the same backgrounds and have formal educational degrees.’*

According to the vice principal of CS2, the position of committee head was reportedly passed down from the previous committee head to his son. The LOGICA2 researcher remarked about similar occurrences in his research area in a nearby province in which the principal or committee head has appointed sons to committee positions.

Other forms of collusion include frequency and lack of inclusiveness of the SC meetings. Meetings occur sporadically or not at all, and when they do occur, parents are rarely invited. The committee head of CS1 describes the frequency of meetings at his daughter’s former school:

‘In my daughter’s school some committees only met twice in three years of schooling. Once when she began and the other when she graduated. These are indications of not working wholeheartedly and for the sake of the school.’*

Vernez et al (2013) reported that in other areas of Indonesia, SCs met with principals on average 2.5 times a year, and by themselves 1.5 times a year. School administrators at CS2 reported that the SC (which functionally only consists of the appointed committee head and school management) meets once a year to approve budget issues. In CS1, reports of the number of meetings varied. Some committee members reported that a meeting is held every 6 months to approve budgets and school plans, but this is not an open process that includes parents. They did not specify who was actually involved.

Though both case study schools publicly posted their expenditures, the reported closed off nature of the school committee and lack of parental input or notification for most decisions appeared regularly within the survey. Seventeen of the respondents provided recommendations calling for more transparency and openness in school processes. Promulgated by both Vernex et al (2013) and Pradham et al (2013), and oft cited by participants in the current study, one way to
promulgate a culture of transparency at the school level is the democratic election of SC members, described in a forthcoming section.

**Collusion in the Electoral Process**

SBM is steeped in the rhetoric of democracy, but as with all floating signifiers, these terms tend to have more power in discourse and policy than practice. Even in cases in which policy is firm, clear and direct, transparent and effective democratic processes can be thwarted by existing power relations that reproduce the status quo. My contact affiliated with LOGICA 2 describes how schools may practice collusion: then an MPD member describes the effect of such collusive practices

LOGICA2-if the school is corrupt, they select their own people...They appoint people they negotiate with.

MPD1- ...the problem is, not all school committees are elected, and not all school committees are doing their work. They are supposed to control the learning process at schools which they are not doing, and they may just be providing a stamp of approval

Collusion in the selection/election process results in the form of co-optation on the school level, where committees are functioning as a rubber stamp for principal/management driven policies and budgeting. When SCs are strictly appointed by principals, they lack the proper power or capacity to check and balance the top-down policies of the school management, as is intended. This is evidenced by the fact that a SC monitored the BOS allocations just as often (typically quarterly) as the district requires the BOS plans to be reported, signifying that they meet only when a signature for approval is needed and documents are in order (Vernez et al 2013). It is the rubber stamp function of the committees and the lack of oversight by government officials that indicate that community participation may not be the primary factor for implementation, that of cultivating legitimacy regardless of actual educational or participatory outcomes.
One step that has been taken to attempt to ameliorate this is the creation of an election committee, which is theoretically supposed to oversee the potentially collusive nature of SC appointment by acting as a non-partisan electoral board to oversee the electoral process.

One risk in this method is that the candidates selected by the election committee are not separated from the personal relationships and existing power relations from which the committee members themselves are a part.

In the national study (Aceh and Papua not-withstanding), Vernex et al (2013) found that only 22% of SC members were elected, while the most common case (47%) was selection via consensus, a process in which primary stakeholders agree on a number of pre-ordained members of the community. The figure shows both the background and method of appointment of SC in the regions studied.

Figure 7: Proportion of elected members

Source: Vernez et al 2013
Another contact within the MPD reiterated that these findings were consistent with the electoral processes in Aceh:

   R- In the election process, do all the parents come together and decide?

   MPD2- Its supposed to be all parents who are having a say, but in most cases only some parents make decisions… Again the better the election process is done, the more participation in the communities, More trust. Again not all SC are like that.

According to the survey results of CS1, 8 out of 20 respondents reported that the SC was created through the process of consensus (reported as discussion meeting or majority vote). 12 of the 20 reported that they didn’t know (10 respondents) or left the question blank (2 respondents), while only 3 reported taking part in the election/selection process. In CS2 there was obviously no election due to the lack of a functioning committee. Respondents reported numerous reasons as to why participation rates were so low:

- 5 respondents claimed to not be invited or not notified
- One reported that the SC was already in place.
- One replied that he ‘didn’t know there was an election process.’
- Another falsely believed that it was the teachers who chose.
- A BOS recipient, also a non-participant, blamed the ‘lack of socialization’ from the school to the parents.

Obviously, some type of consensus involving at least some parents was reached. The extent as to which the few who actually did participate were simply co-opted into agreeing to elect pre-determined candidates was uncertain.

A lack of an elected SC has the potential to create a negative feedback loop for schools. Where an election is not transparent and democratic, trust and legitimacy are eroded within the community. Alternatively, when the election is democratic and transparent, trust and legitimacy are then fostered within the community, which then translates into increased participation and community support. The
increased support will theoretically result in better learning outcomes for students (Pradham et al 2013; Heyward et al 2011) The respondent associated with the LOGICA 2 touched on the subject:

R- So, if it is well managed there is better resource management and education…
LOGICA2- [It] all depends on transparency. It is circular. [It] begins with transparency. Its all correlated…The school without transparency becomes weaker. In SDN Matangrayeuk, subdistrict of Simpangulim, East Aceh. This is the school where the block grant is not transparent at all and the school committee is not active. This is where we found out that the head of the committee is the father of one of the teachers… The motivation is very weak because they [the community] don’t trust the school because the committee does not represent [the community] and the school is not transparent. How do they improve quality when there is no pressure? For example, if there is an improvement of the committee there is pressure through to the committee from the community to school… Where the school committee is not active, the school does whatever they like and it is continued. And it has become very bad.

The researcher recounted first hand how the process of generating trust and legitimacy ultimately translates into broader stakeholder participation in the communities involved. The following figure explicates the relationship he and others have described.

More pressure for change is exerted by the community when more support and participation is fostered. Even should the democratic electoral process for the SC be realized, this is not necessarily the harbinger of change, as agency and opportunities are limited by more powerful actors capable of higher levels of structuralization. But, democratic expression demonstrates social organization through which
collective interests may be identified and in which ‘actors may overcome their powerlessness by pooling their resources and thereby constituting themselves as strategic actors at higher levels of structuration’ (Hay 2002).

**Legitimation**

_Ambiguous Policy and Legimation_

In the sense that laws and policy are always politically motivated and benefit some party, demographic, or institution more so than others, they may be seen as overt mechanisms of strategic action. Policy and law may be either explicit or furtive in their intentions. In many cases, the primary motivations for implementation lie in either the need for control, legitimation, or both. Government commitment to actual outcomes and breadth of true authority devolution in the decentralization and SBM endeavor can be questioned on a number of fronts: the language used in the drafting of the original decree, actual authority devolved, and the commitment in practice of school supervision and training.

Firstly, the language employed in MoNE decree 044/U/2002 is ambiguous and sometimes contradictory (Sumintono et al. 2012; Sumintono et al. 2009; Amirrachman 2009). Sumintono (2012; 2009) applies CDA to a document analysis of the degree thoroughly and teases out the potential conflicts that may arise from such use of language.
MoNE Decree 044/U/2002

Article 1
(1) In each district is formed an Education Council, as an initiative from the society and/or the district government.

(2) In each education institution or group of education institutions is formed a School Committee as an initiative from the society, educational institution and/or the district government.

Article 2
The formation of the Education Council and School Committee can be used the guideline for formation of Education Council and School Committee as attached in the Appendix I and II of this decree.

Article 3
With effect of this decree, then the decree of Ministry of Education and Culture No0293/U/1993 of 1993 regarding the formation of Board of Education Assistance is abolished.

Article 4
This decree is effective on the date stipulated.

Though article one stipulates the formation of new institutions known as the Education Council and the School Committee, there is no explanation of their functions, role, or authority (Sumintino 2009; Sumintono 2012), and no other guidelines were established about how the SC would perform such (undisclosed) functions (Vernex et al 2013). This ambiguity results in no officially sanctioned authority. Vernez et al (2013) further states that the similarly unclear definition of the role of the district persists. As stated, the role of the district is to validate,
coordinate, and supervise school curriculum development. The authors note that MoNE seems to remain cautious about the amount of authority it intends to devolve to lower levels. At the same time, the electoral process for the newly created institutions was unclear (Amirrachman 2009).

In article 2, the term the authors of the decree use the phrase ‘can be used,’ Which Sumintono calls ‘hesitant regulation’ and one which neither party has a legal obligation to follow. Furthermore, Sumintono contends that the wording of the second article expresses the authors’ real commitment to the ideas of school autonomy and local educational governance, where ‘can be used’ implicitly provides a loophole by which SBM may be circumvented (2012). Vernez et al (2013) note ‘It appears the Ministry of National Education remains cautious about the authority it really means to devolve to schools, using language in its standards that can enable districts to continue to assert themselves over the schools’. Furthermore, the lack of clarity may lead to multiple interpretations that has the potential to be confused, misused, or implemented in superficial ways (Sumintono 2009; Amirrachman 2009).

The monolithic SC endeavor denies the complexity and contexts and diverse situation. Sumintono states that the ‘decree wants to ensure that all kinds of societal participation at the school level are of a standard pattern,’ which both denies complexity and further enforces control of potential committee actions harkening to what Cooke (2001) called ‘the domestication of dissent.’

Bjork (2003) notes that ‘the government may publicly declare that it wants to empower local actors, but education officials have not demonstrated through their actions that they are truly committed to facilitating the devolution of authority to subnational levels.’ The depth of commitment of government actors is questionable. Bjork (Ibid) further notes that the Indonesian government has undertaken decentralization in an attempt to appease critics within and above national level rather than truly empower the polity.

The MPD member makes a poignant observation:
MPD1 - As long as the schools are running they don’t care whether the school committee is properly elected or not. Especially the district government.

R - Do you think it may just be a way to make the parents happy?

MPD1 - yes

The official directly implies that the SC exists in many cases for its symbolic value, resulting in legitimacy for the government among parents, local communities, and IO's; legitimation is gained regardless of the attainment of stated goals.

*Conflict Management*

The newly created institutions have created new arenas in which blame, objections or grievances may be directed. The school treasurer in CS1 explicitly described the school committee as a 'buffer' between the parents and the school or governmental management.

Furthermore, by creating new institutional bodies, the government (traditionally responsible for improvement, and failures, regarding educational quality) devolves responsibility for quality improvement to other levels while maintaining authority.

The data collected during the duration of this study adds to this, as a top official in MoNE describes the responsibility of his department:

MoNE1 - Though DINAS and MPD usually go to the school and explain about the function of the school committees, but the way in which they interpret their roles and function are different

This indictment by the top MoNE official places blame for failures in SBM at the level of the school and SC, not on the ambiguity of policy, or the failures of his department and others to adequately socialize and train schools and SCs (effectively shifting blame for failures downward). The process of distancing itself from failure and shifting blame for failures is politically legitimizing for government bodies.

The LOGICA2 researcher further mentioned:
'[If the] the quality is getting better the DINAS [will] watch, because they want to part of this as if it is their business.'

We see in this quotation both the lack of government commitment overall as well as the tendency of the government to associate with successes and distance itself from failures, a politically legitimizing place to position oneself. As mentioned in the theoretical section, the burden of success is therefore effectively transferred from the meso-level to the micro-level, and in the process the government, or implementing organization, has distanced itself from failure (Williams 2004). In the case of schools that are failing their communities, he says they remain neglected yet beholden to traditional authorities.

6.2b Concertive Control and Questionable Commitment

In regard to deconcentration, power devolved is power retained. This is evidenced by the aforementioned lack of commitment by government authorities.

The primary contact at the MPD describes a conspicuous lack of commitment by the district government:

MPD1- ‘The problem is that DINAS does not have strong commitment to this school. And that’s why the determining factor is that the DINAS through the supervisor does not do his work... In terms of the two issues, managerial and academic issues... how can they improve if there is no commitment from the government? And then the district government we also question their commitment.’

The researcher with LOGICA2 concurs:

LOGICA2- The school supervisor is not as active as expected. For example he is supposed to go every month but only comes after 3 months.

The lack of commitment by district government further implies ‘hesitant regulation’ (Sumintono 2009) and provides further evidence of a conspicuous lack of either willpower, capacity, or resources to effectively monitor and implement SBM.
Agency Unrealized- Socialization, Transparency, and Parental Participation

Lack of training and socialization was apparent throughout the research. Many parents, SCs, principals and government officials all seem to be misinformed or misinterpreting the policy and particular scopes of authority. Almost 50% of the parents in the 2013 World Bank study (Vernez et al 2013) did not know of the existence of a SC at their child’s school, as was the case for all parent respondents at CS2. The number of parents who actually participated in the SC sponsored events was much lower, at 20% (ibid). As would be expected, none of the parents interviewed in CS2 were involved. Although all parents surveyed and interviewed in SC1 knew of the existence of the school committee, much fewer actively participated.

Lack of adequate socialization of parents, SCs, and principals is a primary reason for easy co-optation. CS2 principal reported that training was provided once in 2010 for 3 days consisting of the principal, a teacher, and a committee member. None of the parents interviewed were aware of the existence of a committee. The following series of quotations taken from participants regarding socialization of stakeholders illustrate a lack of socialization on multiple scales:

MPD1- ‘Parents are unaware that (they have a) representive that goes to the school committee’

University Lecturer- ‘we don’t have any consulting. They should have strong consulting [about] rules, function, responsibilities and then we can make...what we call community based monitoring project. We can do that.’

MPD2/SC chairman- ‘It depends on who is appointed by the principal, or elected, even someone who is elected wouldn’t know their authorities. Maybe they have never learned about the roles that they can play in the school committee. They have not been trained, they have not been informed by the government, they don’t have a network or...peer among school
committees. ... so what they know of what a school committee is all about is just from the school principal.’

My researcher contact describes the results of such a lack of socialization:

‘Having weak committees, the principal can go with the agenda without any disturbances. A strong committee will do what its expected to do by the community.’

The MPD official comments on potential results of proper socialization:

Another factor would be their understanding of the community ff the school committees. The higher the understanding, the more participation- MPD1

The lack of socialization has impeded the intended purposes of SBM. Whether it is the lack of commitment due to lack of resources or the reluctance to truly devolve power, it has affected participation rates of multiple actors. The following graphic from Vernex et al (2013) shows a substantial lack of involvement by parents regarding multiple school activities.

Levels of Parental Participation. Source: Vernez et al 2013
Even with the existence of school committees, there is not typically an avenue for providing parents with updates and information relating to school policy. 64% of parents have either never attended school meetings or attended only once. Avenues for parental concerns, input, and influence tend to be nonexistent (Vernez et al 2013). The lack of participation results in a lack of pressure from the SC, parents, and the community for educational transformation and improvement. Many parent respondents in the survey at CS1 mentioned that the lack of socialization is inhibiting participation. Four respondents answered with direct reference to ‘socialization’ as if keen to rhetoric surrounding SBM (other frequently mentioned terms include ‘transparency’ and ‘dissemination’). Furthermore, principals tended to lack proper training and tended to misinterpret SBM policy and goals (Vernez et al 2013), which, as previously mentioned, can be the direct result of vague policy, lack of commitment by government, and/or the history of centralization.
The research found that, in accordance with Vernez et al. (2013), operational decisions at schools were found to be made by principals and a combination of stakeholders, but rarely engaged the SC. Parents in both case studies were not involved in funding decisions (even those made by the SC in CS1) and respondents from the survey conducted at CS1 consistently expressed the desire to be consulted and involved in the process. This desire was expressed independently by 17 of the 20 respondents. Concomitantly, the real decision-making power primarily resides with the principal and the traditional bureaucracy in both the election/selection process and to the extent of authority ultimately devolved to SC.

Further, SCs may act as a buffer where school administration may distance itself from parental dissent. In fact, schools in rural areas are more likely to receive direct input from parents. (Karam et al. 2013; Vernez et al. 2013). A teacher/treasurer from CS1 mentioned explicitly that the committee acted as a ‘buffer’ between schools and parents. The parents at CS2 reported that when school-related concerns arise, parents tend to talk directly to the teachers or the principal. The extent to which factors such as the rural context, small school size, etcetera, play in the parent-teacher interactions is yet undetermined. Whether this is more or less effective is yet to be established as well, but parents had direct access, and followed the observation that ‘schools in urban areas were less likely than schools located in rural areas to receive input from parents.’ (Vernez et al. 2013). The same study reported that most SC members saw their role as simply as an intermediary between parents and school administrators to be utilized when something is to be communicated to parents or something is needed from them.

The opening up of a new institutionalized sphere of participation means that it is easily managed, predictable, and its boundaries and authority pre-determined, in a sense ‘domesticated.’ The SC committee can provide an avenue by which school management may not directly engage with criticisms or complaints. Despite either
the effectiveness of the SC or lack thereof, the legitimizing aspect of the committees as being a responsive creation of the government has been valorized.

**Reflections on the Current Research**

‘the price was high, while the promise lies, as yet, largely unfulfilled.’ – Amirrachman et al (2009)

Education decentralization has resulted in a massive restructuring of the institutional, political, and social landscape, often in ways that cause tension and conflict among and within institutions and actors at multiple levels. This institutional and political reformation in Aceh, Indonesia has led to the opening up of new arenas of participation and engagement, but the extent to which these new arrangements are democratic, inclusive, and capable of transformative change was uncertain. Through use of the SRA and critical theory, the research has given special consideration to how given structures and the decentralization process have privileged ‘some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, and some actions over others’ (Jessop 2004). The research questions necessitated inquiry at both the micro and meso-levels with considerations towards power and discourse at the larger, global level.

The research indicates that the current state of SBM and participatory reforms in Indonesia may serve to reinforce and reproduce traditional power structures: the government authority over schools, men over women, and the more fortunate over the marginalized. Though the decentralization project in Indonesia claims to be based on a proposition of incorporating local communities, democratizing school decision-making, and increasing equity, the top-down nature of implementation, ambiguous language, lack of true power divulgence, and lack of commitment often make doing this in a democratic and potentially transformative way unlikely. This is only exacerbated when combined with the predisposition to respect the social order that has been ingrained by decades of centralization. As of yet, participatory reforms in Aceh may represent what Rose (2003) calls ‘pseudo-participation,’ a
process where citizens are merely kept informed by a SC that acts as a consulting body at best.

In that the results of this study seemed to primarily explicate ways in which forms of participation are defined and delineated, future research may seek to further discover and describe, in more detail than is provided here, ways in which actors at lower levels of structuralizational capacity are actively engaging the traditional power structures. A focus on the agency in action of traditionally marginalized groups to organize and engage would add a much needed change in perspective from a focus on the oppressive present contingency to a potentially progressive future. As with much that preceded it, this research contends that participatory reforms are not the panacea for problems that have historically arisen in development and education. It further maintains that such reforms certainly do not preclude major improvements, and the potential for the future is immense, though not currently realized.

Similarly, this research only addresses indirectly the ramifications of the most recent conflict in Aceh regarding education policy, implementation, and political economy. Further inquiry into this theme, so prominent in both the discourse of politics and policy as well as the collective Acehnese psyche, would be a pragmatic next step in the piecing together of a larger multifaceted picture of the current Acehnese ‘moment’ in education.

For now, the onus necessarily falls upon local communities to engage, assert authority, and develop strategic and novel ways of establishing linkages with, or distance from, existing structures. The state of education in Aceh should not be contingent on the central or district governments aligning their practice with policy related to SBM, while even properly implemented SBM as a practice cannot be regarded as a faultless and depolitical process. Broad social change and community engagement cannot be mandated and must be catalyzed at the local level. Aceh has shown that it is capable of developing such novel mechanisms such as the original school committees of the 1990’s and the MPD.
A progressive/subversive engagement of institutionalized participation, where vague policy results not in the diminishment of opportunity or authority, but one in which in new arenas are created and from which local actors may engage existing power structures. Daun (2009) writes ‘If decentralization leaves “space” for local initiatives, it is then a matter of how this is perceived and who exploits the new opportunities.’ It is in the forming of new institutions within and between schools, school committees, parents, and local society where aspects of progressive education may be infused into the liberal model to transform socio-political and material realities of all involved. Hay 2002 explains:

By identifying a collective interest, actors may overcome their powerlessness by pooling their resources and thereby constituting themselves as strategic actors at higher levels of structuration (2002, p 383)

Proponents of education decentralization have overlooked that ‘education is not merely an administrative matter, but also socio-political’ (Edwards and Klees 2012), failing to take into account power relations and massive variability within the global, Indonesian, and more specifically Acehnese context. This research hopes to place education reforms in Aceh amid a larger spacio-temporal, economic, and social context of underlying mechanisms that exert and are exerted upon dialogically and tangentially. Without facing these political and social realities, any substantive transformation is unlikely to occur. Encompassing reforms deny the social, political, and economic diversity of local contexts and the sphere of global discourse from which they arise. In this research, I have attempted to accentuate and demystify these underlying mechanisms while re-politicizing these relations by restoring active and strategic subjects into focus.

To draw on the sentiments of Edwards and Klees (2012), participation is not something to be imposed or bestowed but something that is to be fostered from below in a dialogical process. They say that progressives would argue that:

the continuing economic, political, technological and cultural globalisation will increasingly affect the day-to-day lives of the world's population, and that, as such,
the challenge is to democratise this force, and this implies fostering widespread participation (Mundy 2007). That is, given the reality of globalisation, many suggest that it is better to engage with it and transform it – preferably through participatory and democratic means – rather than to ignore it (2012, pp 61).

The authors do not deny the encroachment of the global, but provide a new framework from which to engage via a new participation, consistent with those proffered by Malen (1994) and Anderson (1998).

Though modern discourse has often reduced participation to a politically valuable five-syllable utterance, it remains wrought in ambiguity. Participation in its platonic and most simple sense, by its most basic definitions, remains a potent transformatory tool as the antithesis of apathy, subversion, and domination. The purpose of this research is not to denigrate the participatory process but to identify the motives for and barriers to it. As development projects incorporating participation undoubtedly move forward, we must always remember to ask two questions: Who participates, and towards what end?
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