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Rewriting the rules of the school uniform: Insights into power and policy in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Non-formal education (NFE) in Tanzania has experienced a recent swell of government support at the secondary school level, where efforts have focused on mainstreaming teenage mothers back into formal education. NFE is defined as any instruction outside of formal schooling that involves the acquisition of basic education; it is used as a complementary feature in most education systems around the world because it provides flexible and accelerated pathways to learning. My doctoral research examines how the political economy arrangements in Tanzania's education system shape the delivery of NFE at secondary school centers known as, 'open schools.' This piece draws on findings from my fieldwork, including policy analysis and in-depth interviews, to narrow in on the reappropriation of policy rules for the use of school uniforms in open schools. In Tanzania, government cohesion around education policymaking exists but the institutions that regulate and distribute education priorities are highly personalized, giving way to policy misalignments that allow for ground-level actors to redefine policy rules. In the case of the school uniform, policies stipulate that NFE students are exempt from wearing them but, in practice, open schools enforce strict uniform rules for their students. School uniforms serve as powerful social signifiers of age and authority. Schools and teachers at the frontline of NFE provision are attuned to these social norms and rewrite the uniform rules accordingly. My reflections on uniform use in Tanzanian open schools are helpful for a broader analysis of how ground level actors can correct for policy misalignments. However, more research is needed to better understand how political economy shapes these misalignments. Furthermore, reforms need to be grounded in local knowledge, as policy priorities are often too far removed from the realities on the ground.

KEYWORDS

Non-formal education, policy implementation, political economy, governance, school uniforms

> The policy officially says they do not need uniforms. But yeah, they have uniforms. The uniforms protect them. Because you know when they were studying in formal schools they were deceived, you know, by the boys around. And then they got pregnant, and they had to drop out. But they need to feel like students again and putting on the uniforms will do that; it will also protect them out in the street. So they get instructed to put on the uniform even if they are in a different color to our formal students. Any uniform will do. And they agree. (B7S11, interview, October 23, 2023)

Introduction

Education policy and its implementation take shape on battlegrounds of power; power to determine what, how, and for whom policies are made and put to practice. The quote above is from a fieldwork interview in Tanzania and it captures the guiding argument of this reflection piece. That is, that policymakers have the power to set policy priorities and, in doing so, to frame the boundaries of expected policy outcomes.

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In practice, however, and in contexts where education reforms are hindered by weak governance capacity, frontline providers of education (i.e. schools and teachers) have the power to enact policies in ways that can more adequately address student needs.

This reflection piece is based on the broader findings of my doctoral research, which examines the dynamics of power involved in the forging and implementation of education policies for non-formal education (NFE) at the secondary school level in Tanzania. NFE is a complex term that can include many schooling interventions but is generally defined as any instruction outside the formal system involving the acquisition of basic education or life skills (UNICEF, 2007; Hoppers, 2006). In Tanzania, NFE at the secondary school level happens in learning centers commonly referred to as, 'open schools,' where students who have dropped out of formal education can access a condensed version of the formal curriculum to complete the secondary school cycle. In the paragraphs that follow, I will provide an overview of my research methodology; I will unpack the history of NFE in Tanzania to highlight its managerial constraints and the political imperatives in which it operates; and I will discuss the school uniform rules in the implementation of NFE policy at open schools—rules that get reappropriated in important ways, providing useful insights into broader policymaking mechanisms.

Education scholars have pointed out that policy implementation can be far removed from the goals of policies themselves (Grindle, 2004; Hickey and Hossain, 2019). My reflection furthers this argument, highlighting the power of schools and teachers to enact policy in ways that align to student wellbeing rather than to policy rules. Given Tanzania's policymaking environment and the limited governance structures on which it rests, there is a need to better capture and amplify ground-level actor implementation power: if teachers and schools are rewriting policy rules to better adapt to student needs, it is perhaps those very rules that policies need to be informed by in the first place.

Research framework and data collection

The overarching question guiding my doctoral research is how political economy arrangements in Tanzania's education system materialize in the enactment of NFE policies at open schools. To answer this, I apply a political settlements lens to understand the different configurations of power between the actors responsible for non-formal secondary education in Tanzania. Political Settlement Analysis (PSA) is concerned with the balance of power in society (Khan, 1995; Hickey et al., 2022); in it, power negotiations between elites, social classes, and formal and informal institutions are seen as the underlying fabric of any state. My research is concerned with the formal and informal rules of NFE provision, both in terms of elite power (i.e. what priorities go into policy) and the distribution of implementation power (i.e. how priorities materialize in open schools). This lower level of analysis is the focus of my dissertation and the centerpiece of this reflection.

In Tanzania, where the political settlement is dominant-personalized, government cohesion around education exists but the institutions that regulate and distribute education priorities are highly personalized. Given this policy environment, it is necessary to examine the more informal mechanisms through which NFE policy is implemented at a granular scale. To do this, my research design borrows from Pritchett's (2015) Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) framework to zoom in on the managerial relationships between policy actors. The framework is made up of distinct accountability elements that, when adapted to my scope, help identify the interplay of implementation power on the ground. By examining how dominant-personalized power dynamics are negotiated amongst NFE actors, we can better understand how NFE priorities are distributed and—as with the case of the school uniform—reclaimed by frontline providers in ways that overtly ignore top-down policy stipulations in order to better serve students.

My research methodology is qualitative, using data from a documentary analysis of relevant NFE policies and from 75 in-depth interviews carried out in 2023. The interview sample includes government officials as well as school administrators and teachers from 20 open schools across two districts in Tanzania. All school and interview data has been anonymized and coded with number references, for which a full index

is included in my dissertation but, here, only referenced by individual interviewee codes.

NFE and the governance challenge in Tanzania

NFE is used by countless countries around the world as a complementary feature to their formal education systems, as it offers flexible pathways to learning for students limited by access, time, or circumstance (Almeida & Morais, 2024; Pereira et al., 2019). In Tanzania, NFE has existed since independence although it was initially only focused on literacy skills for adults. It evolved over the years to include vocational training and eventually expanded to provide alternative pathways for basic education at the primary and secondary levels (Mushi, et al., 2002). In its current form, NFE in Tanzania is comprised of a myriad of independent programs, each funded through various governing bodies and targeting different sectors of the population but often with overlapping mandates and aims.

Outside of Tanzania, NFE has been successfully employed by countless countries to expand learning beyond traditional schooling spaces (DeStephano, 2010; Rose 2007; OECD, 2021). The key to achieving successful NFE interventions, however, is for these to operate within systems that are regimented by robust governance structures (Levy, 2014; Glassman & Sullivan, 2006). Education relies on regulatory frameworks that lay out clear responsibilities for the actors involved in its provision (i.e. policymaking), as well as on the practices that enable these to materialize on the ground (i.e. management). Governance and management are linked by relationships of accountability that ensure education objectives are met in the delivery of services (Spivack, 2021). The education system in Tanzania struggles with financial and bureaucratic capacity in a way that severely inhibits its service provision. It is a system run by a network of inter-related but largely independent actors whose enforcement capabilities are diminished by inefficient decentralization (Bhalalusesa, 2020).

Most education systems around the world have a mix of centralized and decentralized governance structures, creating a set of relationships under which the delivery of education takes place (McLennan, 2003). Decentralizing public services like education has been argued to reduce system inefficiencies by bringing the centers of decision-making power closer to the public (Galiani et al., 2008; Faguet & Pöschl, 2015). Nonetheless, decentralization has also eroded public service provision in countries where local government has weak capacity, as is the case in Tanzania. The success of decentralizing an education system arguably relies on strong accountability relationships between the centers of power that shape governance structures in the first place (Sasaoka & Nishimura, 2010). In the Tanzanian education system, decentralized ministerial operations largely ignore the fractures of accountability between actors, thus impeding the successful implementation of policies and of the goals these set out for the meaningful delivery of learning.

Education in Tanzania is governed by two independent ministries, which delegate NFE responsibilities to two further government bodies, one of which is the Institute of Adult Education (IAE). The IAE serves as the technical arm of the education ministry and is tasked with the management of all adult and non-formal education in the country (URT, 1995). This is a monumental task, as adult and non-formal education includes over a dozen programs that target students of all ages and across all levels of the education cycle (Shirima, 2016). This program diversity is further complicated by funding from a plethora of agents with competing or short-term agendas (Bhalalusesa, 2020). For the sake of brevity, I will forgo more details about the technical burdens that come with such a convoluted education system; but leaving it to surface logic alone, it stands that the more governance structures you have, the more financial and organizational resources you need to ensure that each of the structures is accountable to the others, to its own actors, and to the system as a whole.

NFE and politics in Tanzania

NFE at the secondary school level has experienced a recent swell of government support in Tanzania (B6S6, interview, October 18, 2023). This, with the two-fold aim of addressing low completion rates in the country and of reverting the previous administration's ban on pregnant girls remaining in school. Policy

directives led by current president, Samia Hassan, have taken hold of the NFE landscape, making it a priority to get young mothers back into the formal education system (Issa & Temu, 2023). With financing from the World Bank, Tanzania launched its Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP) in 2021. SEQUIP is meant to refurbish the non-formal secondary school system and targets girls aged 14–18 who previously dropped out but wish to return to school (Jesse, 2019). Due to system constraints, the program was implemented in existing NFE centers across the country, now referred to in policies as 'alternative learning centers,' instead of the previously used 'open schools.' This language change, which aligns with the international terminology for non-formal schooling, is not insignificant. Rather, it is representative of a broader power struggle whereby political prerogatives from the top—be it national or international—try to replace common practices at the ground level.

Since its roll-out, SEQUIP has become the de facto NFE program at the secondary school level, prioritized by the government in both policy and practice. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology cemented this emphasis by publishing new management guidelines for open schools and for the mainstreaming of SEQUIP priorities onto pre-existing NFE practices (IAE & MoEST, 2022). In this, the government has largely ignored the ground-level complexity of open school provision, including the broad range of students to which open school must adapt. Prior to SEQUIP, open schools catered rather organically to a wide array of community learning needs (A3G, interview, June 8, 2023); the mixing of SEQUIP and non-SEQUIP students further intensified the complex patchwork of learning that open schools grapple with during the implementation of policies (B6S6, interview, October 18, 2023). This assemblage of student needs is difficult enough to cater to without the interjection of government actions that accentuate differences. From an extreme but not uncommon example in an open school classroom: a 14-year-old young mother in the SEQUIP program is meant to be treated, per policies, in the same way as a 22-year-old man returning to school for a secondary school diploma after a ten-year hiatus. Moreover, some open schools operate out of formal secondary schools in remote locations. In these schools, formal students, NFE students of varying ages and circumstance, and SEQUIP students all co-exist under the same learning roof, bound by tangled and conflicting policy rules including who is made to wear a school uniform and who is not (C27S10, interview, October 23, 2023).

When policies are not attuned to system capacity or student realities, they are challenging to navigate at the point of implementation. This breakdown between policy and practice gives space for frontline providers to renegotiate education priorities and to correct for misalignments. Which is exactly what happens with the rules for school uniform use.

The use of school uniforms

School uniforms are powerful signifiers both inside and outside the classroom. Research on their use in developing countries suggests they can accentuate socio-economic differences—both restricting and encouraging access to education depending on circumstance (Sabic-El-Rayess et al., 2019; Wilken & Van Aardt, 2012). School uniforms have also been linked to student safety (Stanley, 1996). This being the focus of this reflection, as it was clear from my fieldwork that policy rules for uniforms in open schools are consistently repurposed to protect the physical and mental wellbeing of students. Uniforms and personal safety are linked because school uniforms are signifiers of identity, stemming from associations of power, age, status, and authority (Diko, 2004, 2012; Sigauke, 2023). These signifiers are nuanced and highly context-specific, only adequately captured in the ground-level practice of NFE and, conversely, lost in top-level policy priorities without the appropriate feedback loops that capture real-world granularity.

NFE in Tanzania was conceptualized in the 1960s as an informal learning space for adult literacy. As such, all NFE students are understood by policies as existing beyond the bounds of uniform practices meant for younger learners who otherwise need these for good conduct and obedience (Harber, 2021). In contrast to the assumptions that NFE policies make, however, open schools serve students of all ages and

backgrounds; often, teenagers and young adults seeking secondary education outside of the formal system but still requiring uniforms for the social rules they involve. For non-formal students re-entering the education space, the uniformity and implied anonymity of wearing a school uniform becomes a signifier of normalcy. It becomes an important counterbalance to the complicated nature of their schooling.

Outside the classroom, the school uniform holds equally strong cultural associations in Tanzania. A student in uniform is seen as someone who belongs somewhere; perceived as being cared for, someone who others are supporting financially. A school uniform marks an investment of time and money, so interfering with that student's safety means facing the repercussions of the community backing them (C49S19, interview, October 26, 2023). In his research on uniforms in Cameroonian culture, Fokwang (2015) refers to uniforms as a type of "social skin" (p. 690). When applied to the schooling context in Tanzania, the uniform becomes a protective skin, shielding students from societal dangers and assumptions in ways that plain clothes do not. This becomes especially necessary when the student is young or female because of the added power dynamics involved. A child seen in or out of uniform is not given the same social value and, equally, a girl in or out of uniform is understood as having different safeguarding structures around her (B11S18, interview, October 26, 2023).

Circling back to the quote that opens this reflection piece, female students in open schools are likely to have dropped out of formal schooling because of unwanted pregnancies. For them, the school uniform becomes both a classroom status normalizer and a protection from more physical violence outside of school (B7S11, interview, October 23, 2023). Open schools are often in very remote places, as far as 20 kilometers away from paved roads or villages. Walking those long distances involves high physical risk and uniforms serve as a buffer for that. Furthermore, returning to school after an extended hiatus can also be psychologically challenging for young mothers (Chigona and Chetty, 2007). Wearing a uniform in the same way that formal students do can ease that transition by helping them feel 'normal' (B12S18, interview, October 26, 2023). Lastly, open school students tend to be from poor social backgrounds, or have learning and behavioral difficulties (B2S2, interview, June 7, 2023). For them, enrolling in open schools—whether after a break or for the first time, at a more advanced age than formal students—can also be eased with a uniform. By being allowed to partake in the school uniform ritual, non-formal students can more readily self-identify with the broader student community without alienating signifiers of personal circumstance (C48S7, interview, November 30, 2023).

Under healthier policy conditions, NFE uniform rules would reflect all the complex needs of the different student groups that NFE serves; under healthier conditions, non-formal secondary school students would not share classrooms with formal students nor would vastly different age groups be made to learn together. Lacking these conditions, however, open school administrators and teachers are burdened with the task of rewriting policy rules to adapt to the complicated and constrained NFE realities.

Rewriting the rules

The discrepancy between policy and provision of NFE at open schools creates a power and opportunity gap that frontline providers can, and do, fill. Policymaking in Tanzania assumes a top-heavy hierarchical bureaucratic structure in which actors at the bottom of the implementation ladder are envisioned as passive stakeholders who simply follow policy rules. What the case of the school uniform shows, however, is that these presumed power structures are flipped so that those with the greatest influence on how and what policy objectives are met are the schools and teachers themselves. Policy rules are not taken as they are but, rather, rewritten at the ground-level to reflect the learning realities. At each school I visited during fieldwork, I asked teachers why they enforced a strict uniform policy when IAE regulations do not require it. The answers I got were all a version of this:

> Our [school's] policy says they need uniforms. But at first, when we first started, policy from the IAE says it doesn't allow us to force the uniform. So, then we said, due to our environment

> here, as we can see, we're surrounded by bush. When a student goes there it's quite difficult to notice if that is our student. Then we sat down and said we needed uniforms for them, so last year we have tried to provide uniforms for all students. And some parents who have knowledge about the importance of uniform, they prepare the uniform for them. (B2S2, interview, June 7, 2023)

The quote is one of many from interviews in remote open schools, where identifying a student in isolated environments becomes an important safety mechanism of schooling. Teachers are attuned to the nuances of open schooling in ways that policies are not and therefore respond to needs more effectively. In school after school, ground-level uniform practices ignored government rules in favor of student wellbeing. Adjusting these rules is so important that school staff do so through the pooling of their own time and resources. The quote above alludes to this and on more than one occasion, teachers recounted the ways in which they source uniforms themselves: they call parents and plead with them to provide uniforms for their children even when the rules say otherwise (CB7S11, interview, October 20, 2023); they attend village meetings to ask for uniform donations (C49S19, interview, October 26, 2023); and in one instance, a teacher said she saved her children's old uniforms to reuse with her students (C34S12, interview, October 23, 2023).

Teachers and school administrators stepping in to help students when NFE policies fall short is not exclusive to uniform rules. Teachers stay beyond stated classroom hours so students can learn an expedited curriculum set by unrealistic policy timeframes (C6S2, interview, June 7, 2023); they pay for student lunches at government secondary schools, where SEQUIP students learn alongside formal ones but only the latter receive meals (B7S11, interview, October 23, 2023); and they pool together money from their salaries to rent rooms near schools for girls to stay in on weekdays to avoid the long and dangerous daily commute (C6S2, interview, June 7, 2023). Under the contextual realities of open schooling in Tanzania, the enacting power of teachers and schools to realign policies to student wellbeing is extraordinary and it requires more attention in the policymaking process.

Conclusion

When education policies take shape in systems with weak accountability structures, their implementation can look vastly different to stated policy goals. Policy implementation is not a neutral or linear bureaucratic activity but one shaped by the varying power of actors to determine (and re-shape) how and for whom policies are not only made but put to practice. The reappropriation of the school uniform rules in open schools served as a useful entry point into a broader refection about policy misalignments in education provision. In the case of my doctoral research, NFE is an intrinsically complex field, further muddled by the power vacuums these misalignments create on the frontline of its provision. Education policymaking in Tanzania assumes a top-heavy implementation logic, where its presumed centers of power define policy priorities that are too far removed from the ground-level needs of learners. Without strong implementation mechanisms, these out-of-touch priorities are reappropriated by teachers and schools with the enacting power to rewrite rules to better serve students.

The rules for school uniforms in open schools—and how these get enforced—may seem a small matter when it comes to examining education policy. Nonetheless, they proved an insightful case study for understanding how ground level actors correct for policies when policies fall short. Education system misalignments are common across the Global South, where governance and reforms are constrained by limited resources. Much more research is needed, however, to better understand how political economy arrangements shape these misalignments. Without a clear analysis of the power dynamics that shape education systems, it is impossible to correct for system shortcomings that are driven by human interactions. In addition to further research on how political economy shapes education policiy, reforms need to be informed by practices on the ground. The political interests that determine policy priorities are often too far removed from grassroots implementation knowledge. The way to fill in this knowledge gap is for reforms to come from the bottom,

bolstering the existing best-practices at the frontline of education provision. It is this grassroots knowledge, in the end, that can provide stronger learning environments with or without aligning to policy rules.

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