



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

February 29, 2012

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Follow Education Review on Facebook



Menken, Kate, & García, Ofelia. (Eds.) (2010) *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools: Educators as Policymakers*. NY: Routledge.

Pp. xiii + 278

ISBN 10-415-80208-3

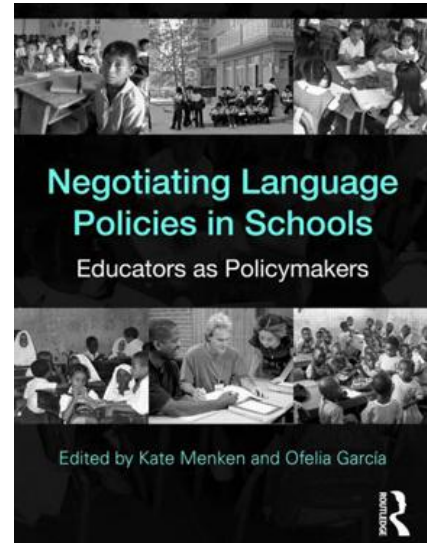
Reviewed by Wayne E. Wright
University of Texas at San Antonio

Educators in Philadelphia seek ways to offer a quality two-way immersion program despite the restrictive context of No Child Left Behind. A mainstream science teacher and an English as an additional language (EAL) teacher in the United Kingdom struggle to collaborate to implement "personalized learning" policy. Pre-school teachers in France of young learners new to the language grapple with their own language ideologies and beliefs and with the policy constraints placed upon them from above as they face the realities of the needs of their students. Teachers in Peru, South Africa, India, and Ethiopia are charged with implementing bilingual and multilingual mother tongue education programs with little training, guidance, and material support. These are just a few examples of the rich ethnographic accounts of language education policies from around the world provided by the contributors to Kate

Citation: Wright, Wayne E. (2012 February 29) Review of *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools: Educators as Policymakers* by Menken, Kate, & García, Ofelia. *Education Review*, 15. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1155.pdf>

Menken's and Ofelia García's *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools: Educators as Policymakers*. As the title suggests, the focus of this volume is what happens to language policies once they enter the classroom door.

The purpose of this book, as described by the editors, is "to bridge the gap between research and practice by exploring the negotiations of language education policies in schools around the world and to provide educators with deeper understandings of this process to guide their implementation of language policies in schools and classrooms" (pp. 1-2). Menken and García describe their book as part of a "newer wave of language education policy research" (p. 3). Their concern is that in past forms of language and education planning and policy research, too much focus has been at the top level of the policymaking process, while the role of teachers and other educators at the local level have been left out or undertheorized.



Menken and García argue that educators are not "just blind followers who implement policies mandated from above," but that "implementation by definition involves policymaking" (p. 250). Thus, educators are also policymakers. Picking up from Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) famous onion metaphor of the multiple and complex layers of language policymaking, Menken and García emphasize that it is the educators who "cook and stir the onion" (p. 250). As these local educators negotiate the meanings of policies, drawing on their own beliefs and ideologies, working within the constraints imposed from above by the policy and by the structure of their educational systems, and facing the realities of the students in their classrooms, the conditions of their schools, and pressures from the local communities, a complex dynamic policymaking process ensues with results that are often much different from the intentions of the original policymakers.

To make a strong case for these arguments, Menken and García carefully selected 13 telling case studies written by 24 authors representing 12 different countries across 7 continents, dealing with a wide variety of language and education policy issues from early childhood education to higher education. The contributors include a number of

well-known and respected scholars who are actively engaged with the policymaking process at national and local levels. To offer some organization, these contributions are divided into two parts: *Part 1: Negotiation of Language Education Policies Created by Educator's Experiences or Identity (Individual)*, and *Part II: Educators' Negotiations of Language Education Policies Influenced by Situation/Context/Community (Social)*. While there is some logic in this division, in most cases there is a substantial overlap between the individual and social factors. A final section, *Part III - Moving Forward*, contains two concluding chapters by the editors.

Following the editor's introductory chapter, the examples in Part 1 and 2 come from United States (chs. 2 and 7), the United Kingdom (ch. 3), France (ch. 4), Peru (ch. 5), South Africa (ch. 6), China (ch. 8), New Zealand (ch. 9), Lebanon (ch. 10), Israel (ch. 11), Ethiopia (ch. 12), India (ch. 13), and Chile (ch. 14). In each case, the authors of these chapters provide an excellent overview of the sociopolitical context of a national or top-level policy, and then provide a detailed description and analysis of policymaking as local educators interpret, negotiate, and implement these policies at their local levels. In doing so, each author draws conclusions from their own case studies that are well-aligned with the central arguments of the book.

In Chapter 2, Johnson and Freeman document the efforts of district leaders acting as "active language policy agents" in Philadelphia in finding and negotiating implementational space within the restrictive confines of No Child Left Behind to establish a two-way immersion program. Creese, in Chapter 3, describes a policy of Personalize Learning in the United Kingdom that involves a support teacher for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students working collaboratively with a mainstream teacher in her geography classroom. A similar type of arrangement, called the Facilitator Model, is described by English and Varghese in the United States in a Washington State classroom. In both cases, despite best efforts of the teachers, implementation was a challenge and fell short of the intended benefits to students, even leading instead to further marginalization of EAL students and their teachers.

In Chapter 4, Helot explores the reflections of pre-school teachers in France on working with students new to French. She critiques their ideologies and the wider socio-political environment which led some to do more than others in addressing their students' unique linguistic and educational needs. A similar process is seen among English language teachers at the university level in China, as described by Zhang and Hu in Chapter 8. Despite national curricular reform efforts emphasizing task-based language teaching, the three teachers in this study "translated officially and externally sanctioned pedagogical practices to suit their existing beliefs, perceived objectives of English instruction, and recognized needs of the students in their classrooms" (p. 136).

Several of the chapters deal with local implementations of ambitious national policies for mother-tongue bilingual and multilingual education. In Chapter 5, Valdiviezo explores teachers' interpretations of Peru's Bilingual Intercultural Education (BIE) policy and indigenous language revitalization efforts for Quechua. Despite the vague ill-designed policy, Valdiviezo argues that these teachers "are in fact central to the improvement of indigenous revitalization efforts" (p. 75). A similar conclusion is drawn by Berryman, Glynn, Walker, and Reweti in their description of Maori-medium education and revitalization efforts in New Zealand. In Chapter 6, Bloch, Guzula, and Nkence document the experiences of three new primary teachers starting to implement mother-tongue Xhosa instruction along with Afrikaans and English. These teachers are "beginning to think about how to shift their perceptions and practices under very difficult circumstances" in a context where "there are no quick-fix solutions to the language-related challenges ... in classrooms across South Africa" (p. 103). Ambatchew in Chapter 12 describes Ethiopia's Mother Tongue education policy and how the country "has ended up with one of the most advanced language policies on paper, but with questionable practices on the ground" (p. 200). Ambatchew documents not only how teachers interpret and adapt policies with a lack guidance, training, and support, but also how some parents help circumvent national policies by seeking English-only instruction for their children. Ambatchew's research highlights the issue of status between mother tongues and national and

international languages. In Chapter 13, Mohanty, Panda, and Pal deal with this issue as they describe the challenges of mother-tongue education policy in India. Like in the countries above, India's policy is not well implemented or enforced, thus implementation varies greatly across schools and classrooms, "with teachers as the ultimate arbitrators and implementers of policy." This is further complicated by a three-tiered hierarchy of languages, English at the top, the regional majority language or vernacular in the middle, and indigenous languages at the bottom. Despite the best intentions of the national policy, it is often the case that indigenous speakers end up in classrooms where an unfamiliar regional majority language and English are the medium of instruction.

Two examples from the Middle East demonstrate how educators can reconstruct policies and open up implementational space to address critical issues on the ground. In Ch. 10 Zakharia describes a school for Shi'i Muslim students that provides instruction in Arabic and French. She uses the term *reconstruction* as "an analogy to capture how language teachers strip foreign languages of their colonial associations, isolating them from their origin, and then through a generative pedagogical process, reconstruct the languages as local by integrating real-world and community centered concerns into language teaching" (p. 164). Thus, rather than using French to role play ordering food at a cafe near the Eiffel Tower, teachers and students in this school used French to engage in dialogue about the realities "on the ground," including "the students interpretations and needs during a period of political instability, economic uncertainty, and postwar reconstruction" (p. 164). And in Chapter 11, Shohamy provides three examples of resistance created by educators at the local level to fill gaps left open by official policy: "The teaching of spoken Arabic to bring together groups in conflict, the establishment of bilingual schools to help create closer coexistence between Arabs and Jews, and the teaching of English to young learners to strengthen linguistic capacity in a language that is considered by many a key success" (p. 194).

The final example in Ch. 14 by Galdames and Gaete seems to be an odd fit as it is the only chapter that does not directly address issues of language policy but rather is an analysis of teachers' implementation of a new national

literacy instruction policy in Chile. Nonetheless, it fits the theme of the book in that it shows "how teachers negotiate policies according to their own teaching styles and those of their children" (p. 244).

The final two chapters by the editors in *Part III, Moving Forward*, provide an excellent conclusion for the book. Backed by the rich examples provided in the previous chapters, in Chapter 15 under the appropriate title of "Stirring the Onion," Menken and García revisit their central argument about the crucial role played by educators as policymakers in the implementation process. To help move the field forward, they conclude with the following plea:

It may be time to dislodge the linearity of relationships between actors in language education policies as being top down, bottom up, or even side by side. Instead, what we propose in this book is that educators be given their rightful roles as stirrers of the onion, producing the dynamism that moves the performances of all the actors.... It is the educators' actions, as portrayed in this book, which enable us to understand language education policies as moment-to-moment, dynamic performances. (p. 259)

The final chapter serves to bring the book back to one of its intended audiences, teachers. García and Menken offer 10 guiding principles to help teachers "make sense of this complex terrain," to see themselves as policymakers, and to act on the power and agency they have.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I approach it as both a former teacher required to implement a wide range of language education policies, and as a researcher who has sought to understand policy creation and implementation, and the impacts of language education policies at national and local levels. My copy is now full of highlights, yellow stickies, and margin notes that are helping to inform and to guide my thinking on current and future research projects.

Teachers are clearly one of the major audiences for this book, though I would hesitate to use it with pre-service teachers at the undergraduate level. Most of the chapters are written in an academic style and thus may be more

appropriate for in-service educators, particularly those enrolled in graduate-level education. Thoughtful questions added to the end of each chapter make this book ideal for a course for graduate students on language policy. The final chapter could easily be turned into a series of meaningful reflective assignments completed by students throughout the semester. In addition to teachers, this book is especially geared towards emerging and established scholars in the field of language education policy.

While this focus on the teacher-level in education language policies is welcome and long overdue, we must be cautious not to lose site on the need to study and advocate for the best possible and clearest language policies at the state and national levels, else teachers will have an even narrower context in which to interpret and negotiate these policies at their level. I speak from experience as a frustrated former bilingual teacher who left the classroom after the passage of Proposition 227 in California. My school district's interpretation and implementation of this law made it impossible for me to help my students develop and maintain literacy skills in their native language (Wright, 2003). And as many of the authors in this volume show, teachers are quite capable of making poor decisions even in the context of good policies. Yet we can't lose site of the fact that the better the policies are above, and the more material support is provided for their implementation, the more opportunities teachers have to interpret and negotiate policies in ways that are truly beneficial for their students.

In addition, we must not lose site of the fact that even well-intentioned but flawed national policies for mother tongue education have nonetheless made it possible for mother tongue speakers to be hired as teachers in the first place, and for students to be organized into classrooms where mother-tongue education is at least a possibility, despite inevitable wide interpretations and practice at this level of policymaking. Missing from the book is discussion of how teachers need to become advocates for changes at the national levels, while dealing with and negotiating existing policies as the local level.

In short, this is an excellent book that makes an important and outstanding contribution to the field. It is highly recommended for teachers and scholars working in the

field of language education policies. A better understanding of policy interpretation and making at the local level by educators—as advocated by Menken, García, and the contributors of this book—is critical to moving the field towards a fuller understand the language education policy process. Such an understanding is needed to inform better policy making at the higher levels, and to help teachers understand their roles as policymakers so that they are better equipped to advocate for their students at all levels.

References

- Ricento, T. & Hornberger, N. (1996). Unpeeling the onion: Language planning and policy and the ELT profession. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(3), 401-427.
- Wright, W. E. (2003). The success and demise of a Khmer (Cambodian) bilingual education program: A case study. In C. C. Park, A. L. Goodwin, & S. J. Lee (Eds.), *Asian American identities, families, and schooling: Research on the education of Asian Pacific Americans* (pp. 225-252). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

About the Reviewer

Wayne E. Wright is an Associate Professor in the Department of Bicultural-Bilingual Studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He taught for many years in bilingual and ESL classrooms in California, and was a Fulbright Scholar at the Royal University of Phnom Penh in Cambodia. He is author of *Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners: Research, Theory, Policy, and Practice* (Caslon, 2010) and editor of the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* (www.jsaaea.org). His research interests include equitable language and educational policies and programs for language minority students.



Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
