Early childhood policy for social transformation: Whose voices count in the South African 2015 Integrated ECD Policy?

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The African National Congress (ANC), as the first South African democratically elected government, promised to transform a political, social and economic system built on institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination during apartheid. As one of the first steps towards the desired radical social transformation, the 1996 Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (ECD) acknowledged the potential of integrated and comprehensive services for young children from birth to nine years, their families and communities. However, the ANC government, since it came to power in 1994, has primarily focused on introducing and expanding a single year of provision for children before they enter primary school. Finally, in 2015, the long awaited National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) was sanctioned at the highest level of government. In this presentation, I contrast the constructions of ’integrated’ early childhood provisioning in the 2015 policy with bottom up participatory approaches to integration that I describe using autoethnography. By individualizing social problems, the 2015 ECD policy constructs mothers living with poverty as deficient and in need of information and instruction to promote conformity to normative definitions of child rearing practices, acceptable family organization and relations. To determine performance of services and entitlement to government funding, it emphasizes measurement of individual children’s knowledge and capabilities against prescribed learning outcomes. I contrast the NIECDP discourses and approach with examples from my experience in engaging families and communities in cycles of action and reflection that can shape and reshape policy and funding priorities. In these approaches, families and communities engage through dialogue with identified social problems and prioritize their own actions to build the kind of society they desire for their children and themselves. In my analysis of the NIECDP policy and implementation, I pay special attention to voice, agency and power relations. I examine the role of ’expert measurement’ in driving policy conceptualisation and implementation, as well as the power and voice of technical experts and professional bureaucrats in relation to the families and communities who are the target policy beneficiaries. I search for potential spaces for what I will call ’deliberative democracy’, a form of participation.

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