INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we present what we interpret as ambiguities in the Education for All (EFA) policy agenda (outlined below), and explore how neoliberal substructures influence the opportunity to embrace the negotiative spaces that ambiguous policies might offer. To investigate these dynamics, we have chosen to examine cultural and historical refractions of the EFA agenda in two very different cultural contexts – Norway, located in the Global North, and Nepal, located in the Global South. Recognizing that what we seek to understand implies a study of highly complex interrelations and processes, we apply the concept of refraction, developed with the intention of exploring such complexities.

THE CONCEPT OF REFRACTION

To enable a richer and contextual understanding of educational practices, Rudd and Goodson (2015, 2012) have developed the concept of refraction. They argue that ‘refraction’, as a concept, provides a lens for theoretical development, informing methodological approaches and empirical investigation that allows for cross-national and contextual analysis and comparisons. In our study, the concept of refraction helped us discern and locate how the global educational architecture, represented by the Education for All movement (EFA), has been negotiated in different cultural contexts. The cultural, contextual and historical sensitivity of ‘refraction’, creates an awareness of local responses and oppositions to policies and ideologies. It also illuminates how these responses will differ depending on the cultures, institutions and individuals through which the policies and ideologies are mediated. According to Goodson (2015, p. 36):

[R]efraction in education may be seen as a change in direction arising from individuals and groups own beliefs, practices and trajectories that are at odds with dominant waves of reform and policies introduced into the field.

T. Rudd & I. F. Goodson (Eds.), Negotiating Neoliberalism, 87–99.
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In the following, we shall present what we interpret as ambiguities in the Education for All agenda, and discuss how these might be outlined by administrative and marketised logics. In order to contextualize this paper, a brief history of the EFA movement is presented.

THE EDUCATION FOR ALL MOVEMENT – A SHORT HISTORY

The right to education for all is incorporated in several conventions and declarations. The two most influential frameworks fronting these rights have been the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the six goals for EFA, shaping the priorities of UNESCO and the framework for EFA’s global educational architecture (cf. UN, 2014).

In 1990, at the World Conference on Education for All, UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF and the World Bank initiated the EFA movement, leading to a global commitment to reduce illiteracy and universalize primary education. By the year 2000, the international community met again in Dakar and the World Declaration on Education for All was adopted, committing nations to a series of time-bound targets, with a 2015 deadline (UN, 2006a, 2006b, 2014).

In close collaboration with the UN agencies, UNESCO organized the World Education Forum 2015, in the city of Incheon in the Republic of Korea. The aim was to achieve consensus on a single education agenda for 2015–2030 and to ensure that the final targets for education post-2015 were “transformative, achievable and measurable” (UNESCO, 2015c).

CONCEALED AMBIGUITIES IN THE EFA PROMOTION

The presence of ambiguities of the EFA policy can be hard to discern in policy-makers’ advancement of the global agenda, and are ignored, or at least not commented upon, in the rhetoric used to advertise the EFA programmes and initiatives. For example, at a conference held in Oslo in 2014, on the topic “Education for Development”, we were presented with research and bilateral projects related to the progress and results of the EFA agenda for 2015. The presentations mostly revolved around how the EFA goals had been successfully implemented in the Global South, and the important role that the Global North played in this process. Implementation barriers were unilaterally explained by a local “bleak situation” in the Global South countries, or the stakeholder’s inability to change. Whether the global educational discourses were recognisable and transferable to the local level was somehow not an issue. It appeared that teachers in the Global South were expected to set their professional identities as curriculum makers aside, and become curriculum implementers. Additionally, what were also striking were the keynote speakers’ outspoken beliefs in the incorporation of diversity through the means of standardization and accountability mechanisms. The lack of openness to critical positions and views,