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Responding to 'crisis': Education policy research in Europe

Nafsika Alexiadou[1]

Research in Education. Sage

Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of international and transnational developments for education policy research, with a focus on the European Union. The rise of policy projects at the EU level since particularly 2000, has altered the relationships between the state, EU institutions and education policy, in terms of the definition of values, purposes, and mechanisms of education change in what is often referred to as the europeanisation of education policy and governance. In a time of financial crisis and extensive population migrations to and within the European space, the paper argues for further critical research on the EU institutions and their relationship to national education systems, as well as on the social justice dimensions and implications of considering both national and EU sites of policy for addressing young and vulnerable peoples' education and social futures.

Keywords

Thinking about education research for the future provides challenges to authors regarding the functions, purposes and increasing external and internal pressures for both education and research. In this paper I will consider the role of research in a changing global context of education, and discuss this in relation to transnational and international developments for policy research.

More specifically, I will focus my attention on Europe and the European Union (EU), and the difficulties the continent is facing in this time of transitions. The financial crisis of the late 2000s and the process of accelerating European integration have revealed deep fractures between the states of Europe and the uneven economic development between the centre and the periphery of the union. The effects on welfare systems and on the distribution of financial but

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[1] **Corresponding author:**
Nafsika Alexiadou, Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå, Sweden.
Email: nafsika.alexiadou@umu.se

also social and educational opportunities have deepened existing inequalities amongst social groups across Europe. Compounded by a refugee and immigration crisis, and by unstable politics in the regions around Europe, we see an alarming rise of the political far-right and of Eurosceptic discourses. At the same time we observe an increasingly slow and incoherent response from governments that seem to be unable to acknowledge their citizens' concerns, but also unwilling to show solidarity to other EU countries, or to the people arriving in Europe for a safer or better life. The institutions of the European Union face great pressures to adjust their governance structures to deal with these developments (Laffan, 2014).

These strains on Europe shed light on a multitude of issues that we are facing, to do with the sustainability of our welfare systems, the increasing inequality and poverty across the region, and all the issues related to migration and a changing population. Education policy research has a great potential to address some of these. By providing critical and rigorous analyses, we have the capacity to cut through the 'noise' of populist discourses and instead provide credible policy options for responding to these growing tensions and challenges. But, the role of education policy researchers should be wider and address the limited definitions and purposes given to education by the increasingly dominant EU and other international (mainly OECD) discourses that for the last few decades have defined education policy primarily as a tool for economic competitiveness, and in rather reductive terms (European Council, 2013; 2015). This is of course not a new task. During the last 30 years education has been seen by international and supranational organisations as part of 'knowledge politics', a term used to signal the importance of education (or rather 'lifelong learning') for the generation of economic growth and economic recovery at times of crisis, and for the construction of a knowledge society (see, the foundation documents of this discourse, European Commission (1997); OECD (1996), but also contemporary varieties of this same discourse in the European Council (2009), Commission (2010; 2012) and OECD (2015; 2016). Even though not new, the significance of these discourses lies in both their persistent framing of education 'problems' and 'solutions' in strongly neoliberal terms, despite evidence that this has not been successful (Nóvoa, 2013), but also, in the intense institutions-building that they have generated. Since the mid-1990s institutions and policy technologies have developed to operationalise, disseminate, and implement these discourses, and this resulted in the production of a huge comparative data and performance industry that aims to drive education policy both at the international and the national levels towards particular, and often limited, directions (Pereyra et al., 2011; Rawolle, et al., 2015).

Within this context, education is no longer merely a state affair, nor exclusively 'national'. Rather, it is constructed and delivered through coordinated activities of actors involved in the directing, funding, provision, ownership and regulation of schools, and who are located in local, national or private institutions, and, potentially in different settings and scales: local, national, international (Robertson & Dale, 2016).

Thus, here I select two themes for particular, albeit brief, attention. The first concerns researching education policy of the EU - particularly pertinent because of the changing nature of education governance at that level, and the implications of this shift from the national to a

mixed national-transnational sites for defining education policy. The second theme, connects the EU governance research field with issues of equality and social justice.

Given the nature of the geopolitical changes and tensions faced by Europe, both of these areas offer possibilities to education researchers for productive engagement with agendas and politics that define the educational trajectories and opportunities of future generations in Europe.

Researching education policy and governance at the European Union level

The European Union is not a state, neither is it merely an international organisation. It is made of institutions that resemble those of the state, but have different functions, purposes, funding and regulation powers. Those institutions have been jointly constructed between the EU and member states, they require the continuing support of the 28 member states, and often face questions of legitimacy. Conducting research on the education policies of the EU is hence quite a different enterprise to researching aspects of a nationally based policy, and raises the need for analytical tools and approaches that capture its unique set of institutions. Education policy at the level of the EU is also a fairly new development, and in the light of the financial and more recently migration crises, it has acquired added political impetus. It is one of the policy fields where we observe a degree of 'europeanisation' whereby there is both a process of important education policy definitions that take place at the EU level, and a distinct system of governance that is European in its construction (Alexiadou, 2014; Richardson, 2015). Thus, designing policy research to understand EU education developments needs to involve: (i) an analysis of such policy definitions and a critical examination of their value bases, origins, construction, and implications (see, Jones, 2013; Nordin & Sundberg, 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2015); but also, (ii) an examination of the mechanisms developed for education governance, (benchmarks, indicators, policy learning and peer review strategies), and what those 'technical' governance tools mean for the political nature of education policy making (see, Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Norman, 2010; Nóvoa, 2010).

Not all research on education policy can do all of these things at the same time, and for the last few years we observe that researchers on the 'Europe of knowledge' have been divided by their disciplines and sub-disciplines, along different theoretical and methodological lines, and across policy sectors (Chou, 2016:1). Still, despite their differences in theoretical approach and specific focus, what unites these researchers is their desire to understand the process of European integration and what it actually means for education policy, concentrating on the dual 'traffic' of policy movement and policy ideas:

(a) The ways that institutions of the state are adjusting to external policy requirements, expectations or pressures through implementation of changes, their mediation and embeddedness in local contexts (see, Alexiadou & Lange, 2015; Halász & Michel, 2011; Helgøy, & Homme, 2015; Štremfel & Lajh, 2010; Wieland et al., 2015);

(b) The ways that ideas and policies emanating from international organisations (EU, but also OECD) are constituted themselves by national contributions, lobbying and power relations

between states and the international/transnational level. Research studies here focus on the spread of policy ideas, and the interactive top-down / bottom-up policy making model that also highlights the differential power relations between member states, and between states and the international organisations they respond to (see, Fink-Hafner et al., 2010; Kleibrink, 2011; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Prøitz, 2015).

Finally, (c) there is extensive literature analysing education policy instrumentation and the various forms of governance that emerge from it, as well as their political and methodological implications, mainly from within the field of comparative education (see, Robertson, 2010; Verger et al., 2016).

This is still an emerging field where important research and analytical work needs to be done in order to understand the significance of the European Union integration project on national and European institutions, instruments and discourses as these apply to education.

Researching equality and social justice in education

The peculiarities of the European Union construction become more visible when we consider questions of equality and social justice in education. This is partly because the EU is not a nation-state with the responsibility (or the legal competence) to provide schooling, and also in part because the entitlement to questions of equality and social justice is to a large extent related to national and European Union citizenship. There are of course many dimensions of 'equality' or 'justice' that we could consider here. The unbalanced centre-periphery development of Europe is manifested in the figures for youth unemployment (beyond 55% in Greece and Spain while below 10% in Austria and Germany, Eurostat, 2015), and the unevenly developed labour markets for young people across Europe. The distributional effects of the crisis, combined with pre-existing dynamics between the wealthy and less wealthy countries of Europe have resulted in mass unemployment and the pursuit of an "impossible egalitarianism" in education where equality is reduced to minimum definitions of inclusion (Jones, 2013:8). This is reflected in the European Commission documents aiming to 'upskill' young people to prevent unemployment (European Commission, 2015), and criticized in research across many European countries where young people face difficult transitions from school to work or further education, exacerbated by social inequalities linked to their family background, ethnicity, and gender (Cuconato, M., Walther, 2015; Lundahl, et al., 2015; Parreira Do Amaral, et al., 2015; van Zanten, et al., 2015).

At the same time that europeanisation processes have 'loosened' national borders in terms of defining the desirable education goals and directions, we have increasing mobility of people who are receiving education (and hence life chances) in education systems other than those of their original nationality. European integration was founded on the principles of mobility of people, ideas and capital, although the protagonists of the mobile Europe had not foreseen or anticipated the scale and nature of such movements. Large numbers of young Europeans are moving within the union to escape unemployment, some in response to the EU's *Europe on the Move* policy initiative (aiming to combat unemployment amongst the young), others motivated by networks of social relations, by political or socio-cultural motives, or by extreme poverty. Some

of the migratory movements are part of an attempt to settle in a new country, but often, they are short-term, or cyclical or may even include more than one locations (Bartolini et al., 2015). In addition to such movements within the territories of the union, large numbers of people are fleeing to Europe as a result of wars and unstable political regimes in the regions of the middle-east and beyond. The EU has been active in constructing an immigration policy, since the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, and more recently links between migrant mobility, integration and education have been in focus of both the Education and Training 2010/2020 strategic framework of cooperation, and through numerous other activities (see for instance, COM(2008); Council of the EU, 2009). The early engagement of the EU with migration issues aimed primarily to facilitate the economic integration of migrants and the growth of the single market. More recently however, the EU, and in particular the European Commission have begun to pay more attention and to devote resources to the cultural and educational issues in achieving 'intercultural education' (Hadjisoteriou, et al., 2015:223). The economic and social consequences of all these forms of heterogenous mobility are hotly debated, and the implications for education policy, research and practice are clearly large. Different countries in Europe have very different ideas about what are the right conditions for integration in education, what models of intercultural education should be promoted, or, for instance, the extend of valuing mother tongue in schools and whether this is used as a resource for encouraging integration (ibid).

Europe prides itself that its founding principles are based on fundamental human rights and the pursuit of equality for all (Treaty on the Functioning of the EU Art 19(1)). Its extensive legal and policy frameworks that operationalise these principles at EU-level are now in place. But, studies of inequality across the EU (Walther, et al., 2016) and the systematic disadvantage faced by particular groups of the population (FRA, 2014), suggest that social justice is far from being achieved. Further research is needed on the individual, institutional and political dimensions of education policies and schooling experiences across countries, in order to understand the conditions for success or failure of young peoples' transitions to both the labour markets of Europe, but also to a socially inclusive and culturally diverse society.

The scope for education research in all these areas of policy, governance and institution building, organisation development, and practice is large and significant for providing policy makers at local, national and EU levels with evidence and arguments that avoid populist rhetoric and short term political expedience.

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