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Policy Learning and Europeanisation in Education: The Governance of a field and the Transfer of Knowledge

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the recent education policy initiatives in the EU through two lenses: (1) policy learning through the open-method of coordination, as a set of mechanisms of education governance, and, (2) what these mechanisms mean for the relationships between national and transnational levels of policy making. It is argued that policy learning acts as a particular mode of control of the direction, nature and content of the desired reforms, while at the same time there are appeals to its political neutrality and operational effectiveness. In the process of implementing and monitoring policy learning, national institutions become important sites for the understanding of reforms in practice. Drawing on a critical approach to policy instrumentation and new sociological institutionalism the chapter examines key debates in the literature of Europeanisation and policy learning and how these manifest themselves in the field of education policy.

The governance of education in Europe & the construction of new sets of learning relations

The policy context

At a time of a financial crisis, increasing Eurosceptic views in the public sphere and a surge of policy actors across the EU that are trying to slow down the process of European integration, we observe a renewed emphasis on reforming education systems in Europe. Both the Education and Training 2020ⁱ program and the recent Employment Reports published by the Commission and the Council, emphasise the need

to ‘pursue reforms’ that will modernise education systems and “Rethink Education”. The desire to produce more ‘impact’ of the 2020 program on national education systems is explicit, and the instruments of governing and monitoring this impact are being refined.

The wider integration process over the last 15 years has produced a European model of education with distinct features, a process that intensified and formalised since 2000 through the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination and its related tool-kit as adapted to education. The current phase of integration across the EU is rife with challenges and contestation related to the fiscal problems experienced by many of the Member States. The very future of the EU project is seen to be under threat partly due to the economic imbalances across the Member States, partly because inadequate attention has been paid to questions of political legitimacy and identity (Etzioni, 2013). In 2010, and attempting to redress some of these problems, Jose Manuel Barroso launched the European Commission’s *Europe 2020*, the “strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”, where education features prominently as both a priority (developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation) and as one of the 5 headline targetsⁱⁱ.

Europe 2020 attempts to present a positive set of possibilities for the future of Europe, but it for-grounds these in deeply pessimistic and threatening future scenaria (of ‘sluggish recovery’ or ‘the lost decade’) that are seen as the dystopias that will follow unless Member States coordinate their reform efforts. A ‘discourse of crisis’ is used in conjunction with older discourses around education ‘problems’ and their ‘obvious solutions’ (Nordin, 2014; Nóvoa, 2007) with education identified rather simplistically at the root of wider social problems: “... better education levels help employability and progress in increasing the employment rate helps to reduce poverty” (*Europe 2020*, p.9). Such statements raise questions about the nature of the perceived link between investments in knowledge, economic growth, the generation of employment, and “above all, how is that employment distributed” (Nicaise, 2012, p.333).

But, in addition to these substantial issues, we should not let the simplicity of the language of the text divert attention away from the increasingly firm language used around the governance architecture needed across the EU to achieve the desired results. The *Europe 2020* strategy advocates a “strong governance framework” and a “more focused country surveillance” that builds on the various mechanisms of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The Council response to *Europe 2020* in relation to education and training reaffirmed the significance of coordination process for national education reforms, and the need to “strengthen horizontal cooperation”, to share good practices among member states and to promote “further opportunities for policy learning” in order to “make the OMC more relevant to Member States’ needs and interests, by making more effective use of the outcomes of European cooperation” (European Council, 2011, p.3).

The sense of urgency is palpable. Two years later, in the Council Conclusions on investing in education and training, the OMC is significantly more present as a policy instrument with a call to strengthen those parts that are seen to spread knowledge about *appropriate* education policies, but also to monitor reforms (European Council, 2013). The Council invites Member States and the Commission to engage more actively in the process of *identifying policy problems* (one of the key properties of the OMC), but also to engage in a “voluntary peer review process focusing on the implementation” of country specific recommendations. This is an interesting development since peer review had not in the past been introduced into education policy, even though it was included in the toolkit of the OMC from the outset, and it was operationalized in OMCs in other areas of social policy. This shift in the nature of instruments used in monitoring reflects the recognition that the first phase of implementing the various OMCs (2000-2004) was far too ‘soft’, with not enough penalties in place (such as ‘naming and shaming’ of poor performers, or country-specific recommendations until 2006). But, this changed after the mid-2000s with more precise assessment of national reform plans, the more central positioning of targets of performance, and the publication of country-specific recommendations. Such recommendations and reform plans follow the Employment OMC and have distinct implications for education with the Council embarking on explicit guidance for the nature and type of reforms needed in individual member statesⁱⁱⁱ.

‘Policy learning’ is a fundamental part of the governance strategies of the OMC in Education, and of the whole reform program that was started with the post-Lisbon policy cycles. It refers both to ‘mutual learning’ where Member States are encouraged to learn from each other, but also to the wider issue of policy transfer and exchange. As one of the key elements of the OMC, understanding policy learning is important for understanding the process of Europeanisation of education, which suggests that the ‘policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things” and shared beliefs and norms that are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions’ are then ‘incorporated in the logic of domestic discourses, identities, political structures and public policies’ (Radaelli, 2004, p.4).

The terms of this definition include elements of ‘diffusion’ of policies from one level (here the EU) to another (the national) and are explicitly linked to issues of learning^{iv}. The political science literature on Europeanisation is primarily concerned with the impact of the European Union on domestic policies and the diffusion of norms across borders. But, in areas where there is no Treaty-based competence of the EU (such as education), then modes of governance based on guidelines, benchmarks, peer pressure, and learning are also seen to produce Europeanisation in the sense of the above definition. This definition of Europeanisation is coupled with the understanding that education policy making is of a highly political nature, *whereby member states co-construct policies with the Commission*, which then get

crystallised as ‘European’. So, the origin of particular education policies may be from within the Commission, but they may very well have been instigated by particular member states who were pursuing their own agenda. Nation states are ‘up-loading’ policies to the European level, as well as mediating proposals originated by the Commission, and attempt to shape these policies before they become set in Concept papers, Guidelines, or Staff Working Papers (for a description of the process within education see Lange & Alexiadou, 2010).

These European policies are then institutionalised to varying degrees within the logic and practice of domestic systems. This suggests a process of ‘mutual adaptation’ and co-evolution’ between the domestic and the European levels. Policy learning is part of the diffusion of processes, as well as of the mediation of policies and their institutionalisation within the national education systems. If learning is achieved through the OMC then we could potentially witness a convergence of policy objectives and priorities across the Member States (Fink-Hafner et.al, 2010; Radaelli, 2008). But, as the contemporary context of economic crisis would suggest, the process of restructuring throws into sharp relief the “asymmetry of the European space” with a marked divergence between countries of the North and the South of Europe (Jones, 2013, p.3). Given the differences of patterns and outcomes of education policy across Member States, a surface policy learning process could produce institutionalised policy objectives at the level of national policy making, which significantly diverge at the level of everyday educational practices.

The next two sections shall provide a brief review of the mechanism of the OMC in education, and the institutional framework for policy learning in the governance of education in the EU.

What is the Open Method of Coordination in education?

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a policy instrument that aims to improve the effectiveness and co-ordination of a range of policies in the European Union by using ‘soft law’ as opposed to traditional law. The OMC operates alongside traditional legal frameworks, and creates a complex system of ‘multi-level governance’ where informal normative pressures and agenda setting from the Commission attempt to direct reforms in social policy areas where the EU has no competence to legislate. It does so by helping member states to progressively develop their own policies in the direction that is ‘jointly’ agreed.

Education policy in the EU is governed by the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality, and limited powers which restrict the competence of the EU to intervene in the content or organisation of member states’ individual education systems. The EU institutions can only ‘ensure quality’, ‘encourage cooperation’ ‘support and supplement national action’ and ‘respect the responsibility of Member States for their education systems (Article 165,

Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). The reference to the linguistic and cultural diversity of education systems in Europe, acts as further limiting any potential EU interest in harmonizing education policy.

So, where the EU cannot legislate, it uses instead the OMC as a means of governing education developments through setting ‘common agreed objectives’^v and through peer and informal normative pressures on Member States, to perform as well as other MS do. The Open Method of Coordination has not been formally defined in the EC or EU Treaty. But, its main features are:

- ‘fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long terms;
- establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different MS and sectors as a means of comparing good practice;
- translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences;
- periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as *mutual learning processes*’. (Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, March 2000, paragraph 37, my emphasis)

There is a long list of OMC policy areas, and OMCs may vary over time. Despite the variation of types of policy processes captured by the OMC ‘label’, there are some core characteristics of the method that can be identified. These have been elaborated elsewhere in more detail (Alexiadou, 2007), so they will only be presented very briefly here:

1. The OMC is a form of ‘soft law’ and hence a ‘light touch’ regulatory tool and as such it does not create formal legal obligations. In the field of education the Commission has issued of 5 benchmarks (references of average performance, used to identify ‘best practice’)^{vi}, and indicators that are used to assess progress towards the benchmarks and the common objectives. Member States *are not legally obligated to comply* with these standards.
2. The OMC is presented as an *instrument for policy learning*. It is open to revision when new knowledge about policy issues comes to play, and it draws on ‘peer review’ (until recently not developed in education), and ‘mutual learning’. Member States are encouraged to learn from exchanging information about ‘best practice’ in education, and from reflecting on their own practice. For that purpose, a database of ‘good practice’ was set up in 2003. The aim of the database was to compare the progress of reforms against the particular objectives. This process aims to offer a context of ‘meaningful comparisons’ between practices across the EU and to avoid mere copying of activities that are likely to

lead to unsuccessful changes (Alexiadou, 2007). The building of comparative policy exchange and learning elements is intended to act as a *drive for shaping national education policies* towards directions pointed by the Commission. Through the ‘learning’ process, Member States are under pressure to mimic the ‘best’ practices from other states, and this mimetic process is seen as a way of gradually solving national and local problems by shifting the problem-solving capacity from the national to the supranational level.

3. It involves a range of ‘actors’ in this process of policy learning and exchange. These may be traditional public governmental actors (the Council, the Commission, the Committee of the Regions etc.), but also private stakeholders (Normand, 2010).

The EU institutional framework for ‘learning’ in education

The Commission has organised a framework for policy learning originally setting up eight ‘clusters’ (European Commission, 2006). The topics for each cluster corresponded to national priorities in various areas of education, with the key areas of work identified in the Education and Training 2010/2020 work program. Each cluster is coordinated by a member of staff from the DG-EAC and 10-25 member states can participate in it.

Clusters would organise Peer Learning Activities (PLAs), with member states opting into those PLAs that were of interest to them, and sending (usually) 2 people representing the national team: civil servants from a ministry or/and a policy making representative. PLAs aimed to develop mutual learning and to facilitate the exchange of good practice between countries that shared similar interests and are focused on specific topics. Member states (sometimes also called ‘donor’ countries) volunteered to host PLAs in areas where they considered to have experience of value to others. They were assisted in the organisation and running of PLAs by consultants appointed by the Commission. PLAs usually concluded their work with the publication of ‘soft’ and non-prescriptive ‘recommendations’, ‘conclusions’ or ‘policy messages’. If the conclusions were seen to be important, they could form the basis for Commission Draft Recommendations, or Communications.

Towards the end of the decade the organisational framework around policy learning changed, and the ‘clusters’ have been replaced by eleven Thematic Working Groups (TWGs). The TWGs are composed of stakeholder organisations and Member State experts, and they are intended to help states modernise their education and training systems in the framework of priorities agreed at the European level^{viii}. Their focus and working methods are adjusted to include better implementation capacity, and they aim to offer practical advice and guidance to national policy makers (European Commission, 2013a).

Their primary function is the same as the clusters. For instance the TWG on *Early School Leaving* has committed to a number of ‘planned outputs’ that include the publication of reports and policy briefs on how to improve policies against early school leaving, as well as the organisation of a conference to present and disseminate the group’s results.

The emphasis on policy learning at the EU level raises important questions for education. Do member states seem interested in learning from each other? What do they learn, who within the system learns, and what kind of learning is produced? And, are these even relevant questions to ask for us as researchers? In education, and more specifically comparative education, there has been a lot of attention to policy ‘lending’, policy ‘borrowing’ and ‘policy attraction’. There is no space here to review these debates, this has been thoroughly done in Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Vidovich et al, 2012.

The focus instead, is on ‘policy learning’ as a concept in comparative studies that provides links between policy making and the governance of education. My main argument is that policy learning provides a much subtler form of political control of the direction of reforms than the more crude older versions of policy transfer. In order to understand this within the context of the EU, the politics of policy learning should be scrutinized and the questions asked should relate more to “why learning” as well as “how” is learning produced and with what outcomes.

Understanding and theorising policy learning

At the outset we should note that the concept of policy learning (as well as its associated ‘policy transfer’) are not linked to one particular theoretical framework. They are rather fluid and open concepts that can be attached to different theoretical approaches. As such, drawing on Vidovich (2013), it is also useful to use a variety of theoretical paradigms in a process of “eclecticism that potentially offers more comprehensive insights into dynamic policy processes than single theories alone” (p.21). Early comparative studies in politics, sociology, and education would relate ‘policy transfer’ to the process of policy making assuming that the main actor instigating such processes is the nation-state, interested in adopting policies that have been successful abroad, to solve particular domestic problems. A classic definition of policy transfer was provided by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996), where they referred to “a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place” (p.344). Many have since highlighted theoretical, methodological and practical problems related to the process of such transfers, and the uncritical borrowing of decontextualized policies and practices transplanted in a different setting, in addition to the methodological

nationalism assumed in such processes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006; Cowen & Kazamias, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

‘Policy learning’ is a more recent term in use since the 1970s, but more widely used since the early 1990s. It has been defined in many different ways and we can distinguish a number of traditions in the literature. First, instrumental definitions are concerned with the ‘impact’ and ‘effectiveness’ of policy learning, and focus on learning that will change behaviour of political actors as well as policies (see Kerber & Eckardt, 2007). For instance, Hecló (1974:306) defines policy learning as “a relatively enduring change in behaviour that results from experience”. Hecló suggested that the role of ideas and acquisition of knowledge about policies is vital to policy makers. He argued that policy learning was a dimension that researchers who were only interested in conflict and power approaches to explaining policy change had long neglected. His positioning of policy learning as a possible source of policy change resulted in a flurry of theoretical work from political scientists developing the concept over the last 30 years. Works by Hall (1989), Bennett and Howlett (1992), May (1992) and more recently Schmidt (2008) elaborated the process of policy learning in terms of:

1. Its focus (learning about institutions);
2. Its scope (learning about policy goals and policy programmes);
3. Its role in policy implementation, and the use of ideas and discourses as explanatory variables in policy change;
4. The influence of beliefs in the construction of policy problems (social policy learning); and,
5. The relationship between policy learning and major paradigm shifts in national policy^{viii}.

The last point here is particularly significant since it departs from purely instrumental conceptions of policy learning interested in issues of effectiveness (of policy designs, instruments and outcomes), and introduces more centrally the importance of ideas and discourses in *changing thinking* about policy. Learning is seen as fundamental in the process of transforming ‘national policy making assumptions’ (Dale 1999:11) about the general direction or appropriateness of reforming policies in a particular field. The decontextualisation of benchmarks and the comparative ranking of systems helps in the process of their acceptance as neutral reform tools (see Schriewer 2009 for an analysis of such decontextualizing in the process of the Bologna implementation).

From this perspective of course policy learning is a deeply political exercise that has the capacity to challenge and unsettle national policy making traditions. In the field of education we already observe influences of the education OMC on national education policies. In Austria and the Netherlands, European benchmarks have been set as targets for national education policy (Gornitzka, 2006), while in Flanders, comparative

information and policy learning are used to “re-orient education policy and optimise its performance” (Simons, 2007:540).

Policy learning, then, as an instrumental concept refers to a process of developing policies as a result of drawing lessons about the effectiveness of particular policies. This is distinct from the wholesale ‘transfer’ of policies from one context to another, as well as from transplanting best practices to different settings. The mere connotations associated with the word ‘learning’ would point towards a more reflective, and developmental approach, drawing from past mistakes, understanding one’s particularities of institutional arrangements, histories, economies, and local contexts. This is part of the potential inherent in the term policy learning, and this could include learning from our own past, from inter- as well as cross-national comparisons, as well as from international organisations:

“A policy learning approach supports the development of tailored national policies rather than policies taken off-the-peg... It uses international experience for a broader range of purposes, including learning about one’s own system, identifying policy options, understanding the process of change and anticipating issues that possible policies would raise” (Raffe, 2011, pp.3-4)

This is certainly the language used within the European Commission when civil servants involved in PLA activities raise the importance of ‘collective learning’, and try to organise mutual learning activities that “build trust, dialogue and reflection” while also learning from “each other’s successes but also from their failures” (in Lange and Alexiadou, 2010, p.453).

However useful the instrumental definitions of policy learning may be, especially for practitioners of policy-making, we argue that a *procedural definition* of the term with “a focus on the social processes involved in learning” would be also productive (ibid., p.453). Following a sociological approach to governance instrumentation, the instruments at work (here the constituent parts of policy learning through the OMC) as well as the processes that their use imply are seen as distinctly not neutral devices, “they produce specific effects, independently of the objective pursued (the aims ascribed to them), which structure public policy according to their own logic” (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007, p.3).

In such a definition no evidence of ‘impact’ of learning as a governance instrument is necessary. Instead attention to policy learning allows for a better understanding of the ways in which networks are developed, actors share good practice, and deliberations are facilitated. This approach, that can be taken either as complementary or as alternative to the instrumental one, allows for a consideration of the more subtle operations of power through networks of micro-politics and interactions. As Rambla (2013, p.533) advocates these can include, “power and agency, international, national and sub-national fields of activity, and the political implication of the expert knowledge ...as these drive the process”. In the case of the EU, learning-

related governance includes activities and policy interactions: (1) Within the Commission and the various stages of developing policy ideas in education; (2) Between the Commission and participating member states, in often ‘behind the stages’ processes whereby member states are actively encouraged to communicate with the Commission and shape policy proposals before these become formal. This is a particularly good example of policy learning as a process of ‘co-construction’ between actors, (as opposed to the more simplistic distinction between ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ processes); (3) Between nation states in informal processes of groupings of influence.

The OMC offers a very interesting example here of a study of public policy instrumentation. The method was agreed in the Lisbon Council before the content of policy measures was agreed – a process that began in earnest a year later with the publication of the 2001 Report from the Commission on *The Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems*. Examined from this more explicitly political perspective, we observe that the revised Lisbon strategy after mid-00s has led to a shift of power within the EU, from the: “openness of Lisbon 1 to the ‘bilateralism’ of Lisbon 2, which put less focus on cross-examination and mutual learning and more on a direct relationship between EU institutions, notably the Commission, and individual member states to implement reform” (Tholoniati, 2010, p.109).

In education in particular, we can see this manifested in the process of governance that has led to the setting up of the OMC. The OMC has significantly improved the knowledge of education systems, problems, and issues across the EU, opening up the ground for action in a field that was previously closed to this policy space. Policy learning as a distinct form of education governance has also given rise to new networks of policy makers who can bypass traditional institutions (that provide for accountability and democratic legitimacy of EU policy making), and promote particular policy directions. For example, the European Commission developed the education OMC initiatives without involving the European Parliament. So, it has been very successful in circumventing institutional and legal constraints in an area of policy where the EU has limited formal competence. In this respect, the OMC has been used by the Commission as a mechanism for what Seddon (2014) calls a “reconfiguring of territoriality” where the authority of policy actors and policy spaces is circumvented to allow for new “boundary work” where the rules of the game are defined by new actors and new spaces – often beyond the territoriality of the nation state (pp.11-12).

Its political power rests in its capacity to provide what it claims are politically neutral instruments (in the form of benchmarks, mutual learning, etc.) that allow policy actors to agree on ‘goals’ while they (may) disagree on content of policies or other contentious issues. The OMC is influencing the behaviours of the Commission in relation to individual member state policy making, and in doing so it changes the power dynamics and social relations that underlie the selection of particular OMC tools (Kassim & Le Gales,

2010). The operationalisation of policy learning (through benchmarks, as well as the PLA activities) has also been shown to affect politics, both by shaping the political discourse around education reform (Normand, 2010; Nóvoa, 2007) and by structuring the debates around action and so the design of future ‘learning’ activities. For example, Lange & Alexiadou (2010) describe the different policy learning styles that are observed in the interactions between member states (reflecting different levels of power and resources) and the Commission, and capture political dynamics within learning that reflects pre-existing patterns of influence between member states. In that research, we see evidence of the instrument being used primarily in its *competitive* form (through the construction of comparative performance among the member states), drawing on normative assumptions that the member states that ‘lag behind’ will wish to strengthen reforms in the desired direction. There is also evidence that member states are not very interested in more reflective forms of *mutual learning*, while some states in particular are seen to be more interested in the exporting of their own policy models (*imperialistic learning*, *ibid.*). Finally, there is evidence of member states engaging in the process only minimally and being concerned with deflecting influence on national education policies by other EU members or the Commission (Alexiadou & Lange, 2013).

Implications for knowledge transfer across Europe

In studying EU education policies we have plenty of examples of ‘transnational policy flows’ through policy learning and the Open Method of Coordination as instruments of governance used to reform and regulate various areas of social policy. There has been a lot of discussion in the field of education around the global convergence of education discourses that direct (and sometimes force) domestic reforms, often on the basis of ‘superordinate’ economic and political reforms. Within comparative education there has been serious debate around the use of neoliberal discourses and globalised practices that have contributed to new modes of regulation of education policy, with real effects on policy and practice in national systems of education (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2007; Lingard & Rawolle, 2011; Dale & Robertson, 2012). Education is a highly political institution that is historically and socially constructed, still deeply rooted in national histories and traditions of practice.

Transcending national barriers within the European integration project has meant the (re)building of institutions that aim at harmonization of policies, practices, and outcomes. As an example of transnational policy making, the OMC in education represents a remarkable achievement of the European Commission’s preparatory work and the Council’s willingness to agree on and coordinate common objectives and outcomes in an area as politically sensitive as education. Adding to this the establishment of a Higher Education Area has led to the so called Education and Training 2010/2020 process, which Member States have accepted as the way forward in making

education policy. The OMC offers a significant degree of discretion in the implementation of the Lisbon goals, in order to allow different states a degree of accommodation to their existing national policy goals. Policy learning has been one of the key instruments used to achieve this adaptive accommodation within the pursuit of the overall agreed reform objectives.

As it has been argued elsewhere, policy ‘travel’ faces significant institutional boundaries and constraints. Some of these refer to legal barriers, or political and ideological commitments to ‘the ways we do things’, while others are more related to the density of the existing institutional field^{ix} in a particular national education system (Alexiadou & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2013). But, policy learning through the OMC has shown significant capacity to permeate boundaries since it was precisely designed as a mode of governance in the absence of legal competence to formulate policy. The process of learning has meant that the Commission and member states have agreed to common goals and to a common direction of reforms that aim to reshape European education systems, even if they did not necessarily agree on the particular content of these reforms, or the means to achieve them.

Since 2000 we observe a refinement of education policy as this emanates from the Commission, with increasingly firmer language of monitoring of the progress member states make in reforming their education systems – and now, the added process of peer reviews. This certainly does not mean that we do observe in practice uniform national reforms, but we can identify distinct developments at ideological, but also political and administrative levels. In relation to the former, Nóvoa (2007) argues the ‘expert discourses’ that emerge from the Commission tend “to homogenize ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ ... and create the illusion of a common agenda” (p.145). This is a powerful discursive and political tool in shaping and reshaping education reforms in directions that seem to be difficult (if not impossible) to resist, since they are presented as the only logical ways to proceed.

But, the OMC has had an impact that goes beyond the ideological. It has spread and become a strongly political instrument, altering relationships and powers between actors (the Commission, the Council, Member States, experts, etc.), and has added to the capacity of the European Union as “a political system” (Tholoniati, 2010, p.94). Still, within the field of education it is often difficult to discern any clear influence of the OMC on national education systems. Most of the research that identifies clear changes as a result of the method, refer to the extent of its institutionalisation as a policy instrument for the Commission (De Ruiter, 2010; Gornitzka, 2006). This however is evident to a much lesser extent within national education policy making processes (Kupfer, 2008; Schriewer, 2009), although there is significant support that ‘new’ member states have been more open to engaging with the method and even claiming actual improvement in their education practices as a result (Lajh & Štremfel, 2011; Štremfel, 2013).

The Europeanisation process in general and policy learning through the OMC in particular offer many examples of the relationships between the transnational and the national levels of polity. They highlight the complexity of the relationships between individual actors, institutions and sectors of education, and the need to examine transnational learning not merely as instrumental and reflective (so, learning by tapping in others' knowledge on a particular policy problem), but also as political in aiming to change values, assumptions and paradigms upon which policy is built (Radaelli, 2008; Rambla, 2013).

Notes

ⁱ ““Education and Training 2020” (ET 2020) is a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training that builds on its predecessor, the “Education and Training 2010” (ET 2010) work programme. It provides common strategic objectives for Member States, including a set of principles for achieving these objectives, as well as common working methods with priority areas for each periodic work cycle”. (Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) [Official Journal C 119 of 28.5.2009])

ⁱⁱ The EU has set 5 targets as part of the European 2020 Strategy:

1. Employment - 75% of the 20-64 year-olds to be employed
2. Research & Development - 3% of the EU's GDP to be invested in R&D
3. Climate change and energy sustainability – (a) greenhouse gas emissions 20% lower than 1990; (b) 20% of energy to come from renewables; (c) to achieve 20% increase in energy efficiency
4. Education – (a) To reduce the rates of early school leaving below 10%; (b) at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds completing third level education
5. Fighting poverty and social exclusion - at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion

(Source: European Commission, 2013, http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index_en)

ⁱⁱⁱ Taking an example from one member state, one of the 4 key recommendations of the Council on the basis of Sweden's 2013 National Reform Programme is that, “Sweden should take action within the period 2013-2014 to reinforce efforts to improve labour market integration of low-skilled young people and people with a migrant background by stronger and better targeted measures to improve their employability and the labour demand for these groups. Step up efforts to facilitate the transition from school to work, including via a wider use of work-based learning, apprenticeships and other forms of contracts combining employment and education. Complete the Youth Guarantee to better cover young people not in education or training” (Council of the European Union, 2013).

^{iv} We need to note that the term 'diffusion' can be problematic in not suggesting a clear agent of policy action (Dale & Robertson 2012). But, it does capture processes of spread and adoption of ideas and practices across different policy settings, through a common language of policy imperatives. Our task as policy analysts is to interrogate such processes and identify whenever possible, what are the rationales for adopting certain policy ideas in particular contexts, how are these justified, and what are the consequent relations that emerge from their adoption.

^v Commission of the European Communities (2001).

^{vi} The education benchmarks for 2020 are: at least 95% of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education; the share of 15-years olds with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%; the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%; the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%; an average of at least 15 % of adults (age group 25-64) should participate in lifelong learning.

^{vii} Currently there are 11 Thematic Working Groups in the field of education and training, in the areas of Early School Leaving (ESL); Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); Mathematics, Science and Technology; ICT and Education; Entrepreneurship Education; Languages in Education and Training; Teacher Professional Development; VET Trainers; the Modernisation of Higher Education; Quality in Adult Learning; Financing Adult Learning (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/exchange_en.htm)

^{viii} For a review of Hall (1989), and Bennett and Howlett (1992) and how their ideas of policy learning compare with more recent instruments of policy transfer, as well as their relevance for education policy work, see Dale (1999).

^{ix} By density of the field of education we mean the multitude of institutions (schools, local and regional authorities, ministries of education, inspectorates, teacher unions, parent and student organisations, etc.) that interact on the basis of a variety of regulatory frameworks, ranging from legislation, to management-by-objectives, inspection regimes, but also professional ideologies of practice. Education is a particularly 'dense' field, and the multitude of functions and interactions at play make the travel of ideas across institutional boundaries more difficult as compared to other organization that use ideas of 'policy travel'.

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