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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Measuring and Interpreting Re-Contextualization: A Commentary

Gita Steiner-Khamsi

The re-contextualisation of global education policy is a recurrent theme in this book. Several authors draw on studies in El Salvador, India, Kenya, Nicaragua, South Africa, Turkey, Uganda or Zimbabwe to make a case that global education policy means different things to different actors, is embraced by these actors for different reasons, and is, depending on context, implemented differently. In my commentary on this inspiring book, I scratch at the surface of such statements that at first sight appear to be commonsensical but at closer examination lend themselves as a starting point for developing novel approaches to measuring and understanding policy change. My commentary offers a methodological thought and a few theoretical observations on the challenges and the gains associated with the study of re-contextualization.

How to Trace Global Education Policy Methodologically

How does one measure global education policy? Is it sufficient to provide evidence that the reform resembles – in design or in rhetoric – policies in other countries or, even more telling, in the majority of countries of this world? Is the occurrence of a traveling reform, which surfaces in different corners of the globe, indicative of a global policy? These types of methodological questions are key concerns in globalization studies. They are hardly new, and three of the most common replies are briefly sketched in the
following: neo-institutionalist theory, diffusion/social network analysis, and policy-borrowing/lending research.

Scholars with a neo-institutionalist worldview tend to draw on a large number of cases, countries or institutions, over a long time period (50–150 years), but only a few variables, to draw conclusions that there is nowadays a shared global understanding of particular beliefs such as social justice and equity. Decision-makers align the national with the educational and promote educational practices that are in line with these shared beliefs and global standards. This is a bird’s-eye view on social development, in that similarities are observed and recorded at a supra-national or cross-national level. From such a distance, re-contextualization does exist but has little conceptual relevance. In fact, loose coupling is a metaphor that is frequently used by scholars in institutional theory and organisational sociology to denote the discrepancies between the various levels or activities of an organisational field. Gili Drori, John Meyer, Francisco Ramirez and Evan Schofer (2003), for example, apply the concept to demonstrate that despite the [universal] ‘belief that science is a tool for achieving development’ (Drori et al. 2003, p. 159), international organisations have developed a variety of ‘solutions.’

According to the authors, the solutions vary from IMF-type to UNESCO-type solutions; the first promoting technology parks and the latter school science education programmes for young children. Similar to discrepancies between attitude and behavior, intention and action, policy and practice, loose coupling is, depending on the author, seen as irrational, idiosyncratic or particularistic and therefore yields few insights for understanding bigger, long-term changes at societal level. In comparative and international education, Francisco Ramirez (2003) and David Baker and LeTendre (2005) revert to loose coupling as an explanation when they encounter profound differences between a universal standard (e.g., student-centered teaching, gender awareness, etc.) and its local manifestation. For example, Baker and LeTendre (2005, p. 177) insist that the ‘classroom in Seoul, Paris, Santiago, Cleveland or Tunis will be remarkably similar’ and add, drawing on the argument of loose coupling, ‘what differences remain will be mostly across schools within nations for intentional reasons and some idiosyncratic variation introduced by teachers.’

The second method of inquiry emphasizes and measures transnational interaction. Diffusion of Innovation studies date back to the 1920s, were revived in the 1970s (see Rogers 1995, first 1962), and refined in the new millennium as part of social network analysis (Watts 2003). The quintessential question of diffusion/social network analysis is best illustrated in the classic example of the spread of the stone axe (see Rogers 1993): is the fact that the stone axe was discovered in different locations at about the same time an expression of maturation (trial and error) or an expression of interaction (borrowing from others)? More than three thousand years later, only a few researchers wonder whether transference programmes (CCT), implemented in over forty countries, represents a ‘best practice’ that matured over time, based on trial-and-error methods for attracting and retaining children from poor families in school. The majority of researchers assumes transnational interaction and acknowledges that CCT programmes, actively propagated, funded and disseminated by development banks, have been transferred from one context to another, and were subsequently re-contextualized.

Finally, borrowing/lending research is genuinely interested in understanding the disjunctures that occur between global education policy and local re-contextualization. I share this critical, contextual or cultural perspective with many authors of this book. Indeed, it is the social, political, and economic conflicts, the power differentials and the legitimacy issues within a particular context, country or case that facilitate the circulation of global education policy. Unsurprisingly, one of the key questions is: why does a global education policy resonate in a particular context? The analytical unit of policy borrowing/lending researchers is the local policy context. Concretely, references to other countries, other sub-systems within a country (notably the economy), or more broadly to ‘globalization,’ ‘international standards’ or ‘best practices’ are interpreted as political maneuvers to build policy coalitions in situations of protracted policy conflict. In line with the theory of self-referential systems (Luhmann 1990, Schriewer 1990), a group of us argues that externalisation provides, literally translated, ‘additional meaning’ (German: Zusatzsinn).

Without going into too much depth here about the Advocacy Coalition Framework in policy studies (see Steiner-Khamsi 2010), ‘additional meaning’ is actually exactly what it takes to make adverse interest groups come together in unison or at least temporarily build a coalition to bring about change. Precisely because the act of externalisation takes a best practice or a lesson learnt from other countries out of context, it is amenable to adoption by groups with divergent policy agendas. Indicator research and statistical measurements help neutralize and provide a stamp of scientific rationality on policies that in reality are politically charged. The different local actors selectively borrow aspects or rhetoric of a global education policy that best fits their own political agenda. The theory explains why liberal and progressive groups selectively borrow certain aspects of CCT (conditional cash transfer), PPP (public-private partnerships), NPM (new public management) and other neoliberal reforms. The de-contextualized best practices, lessons learned from others or international standards present themselves (or more accurately are actively promoted) as neutral, and thereby allow for all kinds of projections, speculations and ultimately broad support (see Takayama 2010, Waldow 2010, 2012).

Having briefly sketched the main features of three widely referenced theories on globalization in education, it is now possible to situate the contributions made in this book. With the exception of Anja Jakobi (in this volume), none of the authors takes on a neo-institutionalist research agenda: nobody in this book assumes that global education policy spreads
because it represents a 'best practice' or because it fits into a universally shared understanding of what constitutes 'good education.' To put it politely, the theory is of limited value for understanding re-contextualization because for neo-institutionalist theory loose coupling is the explanation (Latin: *explanans*) rather than the issue that begs for an explanation (*explanandum*).

Without any doubt, the contributions in this book help advance theories in diffusion/social network analysis and in policy borrowing/lending research. The place allocated for this commentary is too short to get caught up in the narcissism of petty differences. The distinctive feature between the two related yet distinctive interpretive frameworks is the act of externalisation. For researchers of borrowing/lending it matters a great deal whether an explicit reference to another educational system, to another sector or to an international standard has been made. The emphasis is on agency and on agenda-driven policy borrowing and lending and not on diffusion alone. Thus it is not sufficient to state the resemblances between various policies and interpret them *a posteriori* as a case of policy borrowing. This said, many studies in this book are about diffusion and fewer about policy borrowing/lending.

Arguably there is a reason why there are more studies on diffusion than on policy borrowing/lending. Peter Hall's distinction between three types of policy learning helps to explain the methodological differences between diffusion/social network analysis and policy borrowing/lending research. Hall (1993) differentiates between first-order policy change (incremental change), second-order policy change (policy goals are maintained but the instruments are changed) and third-order policy change (policy goals and instruments are changed). He applies the classification to explain why the emergence of the monetarist, neoliberal thought in the 1980s and 1990s represented a Kuhnian-type paradigm shift or a third-order change in the United Kingdom. Incremental or first-order changes constitute the most common type of policy learning, but naturally most scholars are more interested in understanding bigger changes in the form of second-order and third-order changes. Most chapters in this book deal with third-order policy change (see Hall 1993) and document radical or fundamental policy alterations in the direction of neoliberalism (privatisation, school-based management, decentralisation) or individualism (student-centred teaching, life-long learning, human rights). Several chapter authors observe the diffusion of these traveling reforms in two or more countries and analyse how they were locally adapted.

It would be wrong to assume that this book is only about diffusion and translation. It is also to some extent about reception, resonance and cross-national policy attraction, all issues that are prototypical for policy borrowing/lending research. The co-editors of this volume have reframed the issue in the following fascinating research question: 'Why do policy-makers buy global education policy?' (Verger, Novelli and Altinyelken, chapter 1 of this volume). For example, Antoni Verger and Sanne VanderKaij examine in this volume why the global education policy PPP (public-private partnerships) resonated in the Indian policy context and, in effect, made the private sector in India grow through state policy and state funding. They highlight the 'accommodation mechanism,' designed by the World Bank and implemented by the Government of India, which made the PPP proposal fit 'in a range of political ideologies, including social-democracy, conservatism and neoliberalism' (Verger and VanderKaij, in this volume). In other words, externalisation to a particular global education policy – in this case PPP – enabled the temporary building of a policy advocacy coalition between actors that are normally at war with each other.

As well as scrutinising in great detail the interaction between local and global actors and the timing of externalisation, several studies identify the economic and political reasons why local decision-makers buy into global education policy (see also Verger 2011). Besides political gains – coalition building – there are, in particular in the interaction between global donors and recipient governments, economic benefits. Economically, the 'purchase' of a particular reform programme is closely associated with the 'terms of agreement' (programmatic conditionality) for receiving a loan or a grant from a global player. For the donor, in turn, lending a portfolio of (their own) 'best practices' presumably reduces transfer cost, makes it managerially easier for them to monitor and evaluate expected outcomes, and helps them to strengthen their visibility and ascertain their position vis-à-vis competing donors.

**Re-Contextualization: So What?**

Not all studies on re-contextualization contribute to theory building. The great bulk of re-contextualization studies document in minute detail – sometimes across vertical levels, multiple sites and spatial scales – how the same global education policy plays out differently in two or more contexts. Such case studies or vertical ethnographies are 'thick' in description but 'thin' with regard to generalisations. The question becomes: What does the act of re-contextualization tell us about the policy process and, in particular, about policy change in an era of globalization?

Brent Edwards and Stephen Klees (in this volume) examine the inflationary usage of 'participation' in development and, drawing from reforms in El Salvador, convincingly show that the same label served not only diverse but also opposing political agendas. They compare in particular the neoliberal agenda (manifested in EDUCO), the liberal programme (exemplified in Plan 2021) and the progressive programme (illustrated in Popular Education in Santa Marta). The neoliberal proponents and free-market believers, represented by USAID and the World Bank, were enamored with the concept because individual participation in the market
and community participation in school councils fitted their larger agenda of parental choice and school-based management. The liberal spin on participation also included civil society organisations and advanced, among others, participatory poverty assessments. The progressive approach to participation finally used a far-reaching definition that implied transformative change and change in power relations. According to Edwards and Klees, ‘EDUCO schools reflect neoliberalism’s preoccupation with a narrow version of efficiency and effectiveness through community-accountability relations’ (Edwards and Klees, in this volume). At the heart of an EDUCO school is the Community Education Association (ACE, in Spanish) which is in charge of hiring, firing and managing teachers.

There is no doubt that EDUCO, similar to CCT, PPP, NPM, life-long learning and a host of other programmes discussed in this book, qualifies as a global education policy or a traveling reform. The study by Edwards and Klees is so compelling because only a few scholars shed light on the origins of a global education policy. Most studies deal with re-contextualization and compare how early versus late adopters of a global education policy, years later, re-define or modify the imported reform. Let me explain why it is important to differentiate between the initiators, early adopters, and late adopters of a global education policy. The study of initiators, as presented by Edwards and Klees, helps us to understand that there always exist several competing policy options, some backed with massive financial capital and strong government support, and others only supported by civil society organisations or smaller advocacy groups. In El Salvador, the new government, with backing from USAID and then the World Bank, introduced EDUCO as a means to regain control over schools. The neat distinction that Edwards and Klees make in their case, whereby one political group promotes one particular reform, however, evaporates at a later stage of a global education policy. It disappears when we deal with global policy borrowing. Once a policy goes global – in this case EDUCO – the policy takes on different meanings and therefore resonates with different political groups for different reasons. EDUCO ceases to be associated only with neoliberal groups and is, for reasons utterly unrelated to its original context, selectively adopted by different political camps.

The study of early or late adopters of EDUCO in Central America and in other continents (see Popemma in this volume) shows little similarity with the initial context for a particular reason: every reform program, including EDUCO, is, figuratively speaking, an octopus with several arms. For neoliberal groups, the social accountability arm might have been appealing because it helps to improve financial management at school levels, whereas for progressive groups parental involvement and community participation were – to lean on Verger’s great metaphor – the ‘selling point’.

The ambition to interpret the findings on the various re-contextualization studies for a larger theory on policy change makes it necessary to lay bare the theoretical assumptions underlying one’s work. One of the assumptions that I invoked in the previous paragraph relates to the lifespan of a global education policy. As discussed in other publications (e.g. Steiner-Khamsi 2010), I find it important to acknowledge the continuous deteriorisation and decontextualization process that accompanies a global education policy over the course of its lifespan. A global education policy ends up becoming nobody’s and everyone’s policy within a short period of time, making its import or adoption increasingly likely. Therefore suggested that we distinguish between the designers, early adopters, and late adopters of a global education policy. In social network analysis, the three distinctive phases are labeled slow growth, exponential growth and burn-out. They are typically illustrated in the shape of a lazy S-curve (see Steiner-Khamsi 2010). There is nothing more practical than having a theory: for example, the assumption of a policy lifespan helps us to differentiate between the various time periods of a global education policy and explain why local policy-makers at some point – typically during the exponential growth phase – refer to a particular global education policy as a ‘best practice’ or ‘international standards.’ The example of the lifespan of a policy only served as an appeal for making one’s theoretical assumption transparent.

Naturally, many attempts have been made to label various assumptions and categorize them into a larger framework. This book presents one of the most persuasive frameworks that I have read to date. Susan Robertson’s brilliant synopsis, published in this volume, categorizes different strands of thought that attempt to locate the ‘global’ in education policy. The following list reiterates Robertson’s categorisation (presented in italics) and adds kin constructs used by others in globalization and education research. The term ‘global’ captures a wide range of social phenomena including a

- condition of the world, labeled by most authors as globalization

- discourse, also known as ‘semantics of globalisation’ (Jürgen Schriewer)

- project, popularized with the term ‘globalisation optique’ (Stephen Carney)

- scale, typically addressed with terms such as global players/actors

- reach, in this book referred to as global education policy.

Robertson’s thoughtful categorisation enables us to dig deeper into the question of how re-contextualization studies help advance theories on globalization and the policy process. It helps us to identify the areas under scrutiny. For example, several of us have made it a vocation to challenge the current nationalistic and parochial theories on policy change. The conviction has to do with our particular angle: we see a global map underlying national policy agendas. This particular globalization optique makes
us interpret national or local education policy in a particular manner. For us, ‘globalisation’ is – to use Robertson’s terminology – a ‘project’ that helps us to see and interpret local education policy in its larger context. Globalization is the relatively new terrain of reforms or, as Verger, Novelli and Altinaylken (in this volume), phrased it, the ‘context of contexts’ of education policy.

Robertson’s categorisation of how scholars localize the ‘global’ is multi-dimensional, relational and, without any doubt, the opposite of flat. The relational feature of critical globalization research is pointed out by many (see, for example, dos Santos and Soetere in this volume), yet rarely empirically investigated. I find in particular the notions of ‘positionality’ and ‘audience’ key for understanding the relational nature of global education policy. In my earlier work on global education policy in Mongolia, I noticed that government officials frequently engage in double-talk. One talk is directed towards donors (‘global speak’) and is instrumental for securing external funding, and another, printed in party action programmes, funded from the national education budget, and distributed over the media, is addressed to a Mongolian audience (‘local speak’). The first one is published in English and recycled in technical reports, education sector reviews and strategies that are funded by international donors. In contrast, the local speak is in Mongolian and is barely accessible to international consultants and researchers, leading donors to perpetuate the myth that the only reform projects that the Government of Mongolia is carrying out are the ones funded by international donors. It was in this context that I suggested that we examine policy bilingualism, that is, the two different scales or ‘spaces’ from which one and the same policy actor or state institution speaks or operates.

In his research, Tavis Jules takes the distinction a step further and analyses the different audiences that one and the same university addresses in different policy documents (Jules 2012). He finds that the same government addresses different reform priorities and strategies, depending on whether the audience is a national, regional or international entity. His work on policy triangulation represents a fascinating study on the spatial or scalar dimension of globalization studies.

Theoretical debates on policy bilingualism, multi-scalarity or multi-spatiality of policy actors are crucial for abandoning the frequently made distinction between global (out there) and local (in here). It appears that the twin notions of ‘positionality’ and ‘audience’ helps to soften the dichotomy between external and internal that has afflicted globalization research. The twin notion first surfaced in the era of postmodern theories in the 1990s and nowadays also holds a prominent place in post-colonial and post-development studies.

The relational nature between the global, regional and local is not to be underestimated. The most dazzling phenomenon is that local politicians periodically invoke globalization, as a discourse, and present the condition of globalization toward their local audience as a quasi-external force for the sole purpose of generating reform pressure in their local context. The fact that a series of similar global education policies circumspect the globe is often taken as proof that national educational systems are converging toward the same reform package or global education policy. Note the circularity of the arguments: local politicians first create the ‘phantom of (vaguely defined) international standards to generate reform pressure; then they use the existence of such (self produced) standards as proof that all educational systems, including their own, must be aligned with them. To put it differently, ‘globalisation’ is a reality but also a phantom that is periodically mobilized for political and economic purposes. Robertson’s distinction between globalization as a condition (real) and a discourse (imagined) comes to mind here (see Steiner-Khamsi 2004).

For all the reasons listed in this commentary, it is important to study re-contextualization and interpret why particular features of a global education policy have resonated in a particular policy context. Our interest does not lie with describing the global education policy (often reduced to a meaningless label when analysed comparatively) but rather with understanding the re-contextualized versions of the policy. It is the re-contextualized versions of one and the same global education policy that tells us something about context but also about the policy process and change.

References

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Global Education Policy: Creating Different Constituencies of Interest and Different Modes of Valorization

Roger Dale

From the opening page of the Introduction, the central unifying role of the idea of Global Education Policy (GEP) and development in the volume is very evident. All authors seem comfortable to operate under its auspices. The very wide range of instances and foci that make up the volume instantiates the potential reach most effectively. This is indeed an impressive range of studies that can make a serious claim to represent the state of the art.

What is also striking is the fact that despite the very wide range of cases, locations, objectives, sponsors, partnership models, levels of education, academic approaches and so on, the most consistent conclusion to be drawn from the separate projects and cases, and collectively across the projects and cases, is that most if not all of them appear to fail. Looking across the fascinating range of the projects and the varied and important detail reported in the various chapters it is evident that what they have in common, besides involving ‘outside’ ‘interventions’, in typically national education systems, is that little if any net gain or successful achievement of objectives is reported.

Equally notable are the similarities in the accounts of the very diverse range of projects and examples contained in the volume. On the one hand, there is a recurring account of what is seen as ‘technical’ failure, including inadequacy of conceptualisation of the problem, ineffectiveness or inappropriateness of implementation mechanisms, lack of capacity, insufficient funding, etc. On the other hand, we find discourses of cultural