Why do Policy-makers Adopt Global Education Policies? Toward a Research Framework on the Varying Role of Ideas in Education Reform

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Introduction

Globalization is profoundly altering the education policy landscape. It introduces new problems in education agendas, compresses time and space in policy processes, and revitalizes the role of a range of supra-national players in educational reform. This deterritorialization of the education policy process has important theoretical and epistemological implications. Among others, it is forcing comparative education scholars to pay more attention to the politics and dynamics involved in the *policy adoption* stage.

Policy adoption is a moment that has acquired a great deal of strategic significance in current education reforms. Indeed, in the contemporary global governance scenario, education policy processes cannot be analyzed by simply looking at the conventional sequence of agenda setting, policy design, implementation, and evaluation stages; nor by looking at these different moments simply from a national *optique*. Due to transnational influences of a very different nature, education reforms are more and more often externally initiated, and multiple scales interact in the dynamics through which these reforms are negotiated, formulated, implemented, and even evaluated.

Focusing on policy adoption implies paying closer attention to, and producing more empirical research on, the processes, reasons and circumstances that explain how and why policy-makers (or other education stakeholders) select, embrace, and/or borrow global education policies, and aim to implement them in their educational realities. Looking at the adoption stage has the potential to introduce new perspectives in the study of global education policy (GEP), as well as to disentangle several aspects of the global policy debate that, in comparative education, have been often captured by the convergence-divergence dilemma.

To contribute to building this research strand, I suggest looking more in depth at the role that ideas play in policy decisions and related policy outcomes in a global governance scenario. It is noteworthy that policy analysis – not only in the education field - tends to neglect an explicit reflection on the role of ideas in processes of policy and/or institutional change. To a great extent, this happens due to the difficulty in defining and categorizing ideas, as well as in distinguishing them from other social phenomena (Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001). Despite these challenges, I argue that a more explicit conceptualization and theorization on the role of ideas will contribute to providing a better account of the nature, processes, and outcomes of GEP.

Finally, I also argue that to understand why external policy ideas are selected and retained in particular places, we need to look more closely at contextual contingencies of a different nature, especially at those of a political and institutional nature. 'Context' is one of those concepts often used - and abused - in comparative education. It carries strong semiotic connotations and its meaning is often taken for granted. To address this frequent absence, in this article, I will explore how a range of key contextual variables can be operationalized in GEP research.

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I develop these arguments in three main sections. In the first, I review the different traditions in education and globalization studies, and justify the necessity of looking more explicitly and systematically at the policy adoption stage. In the second section, I review how different theoretical approaches in social sciences can contribute to analyze the role of ideas in GEP change, and in policy adoption in particular. In the third section, I systematize a range of contextual dimensions that are more decisive in processes of education policy adoption. If in the previous section I was reflecting on *what types of ideas are most influential in GEP processes, and how,* in this one I will be reflecting on the *particular institutions and contextual circumstances that favor or inhibit the influence of certain global ideas in particular territories*. To illustrate the different theoretical premises presented in the article, I apply them to a particular area of education reform: the spread of education privatization, since this is one of the most extensively promoted reform approaches in global education agendas in recent decades.

Different Traditions in Global Education Policy: Beyond the Convergence-Divergence Debate

In comparative education, the study of globalization and education policy is strongly influenced by macro theoretical approaches, two of the most noteworthy being the 'World Society' theory and the 'Globally Structured Educational Agenda' (GSEA). The first argues that the 'education institution', as we know it, has spread around the world as part of the diffusion of a culturally embedded model of the modern nation-state. According to this theory, a range of common education policies (but also health, fiscal policies, etc.) have been adopted around the planet as the result of both the international dissemination of the values of western modernity as well as the legitimation pressures that governments receive – especially in postcolonial settings - to demonstrate to the international community that they are building a 'modern state' (Meyer et al., 1997).

For its part, the GSEA sees the world capitalist economy as the driving force of globalisation and as the main causal source of the profound transformations manifested in the education arena today (Dale, 2000). This approach stresses that most significant educational changes we witness today should be understood as being embedded within interdependent local, national and global political economy complexes. International financial organizations are key agents in this multi-scalar scenario due to their agenda setting capacities; among other things, they define what the main problems are that member-states should address if they want to successfully integrate into an increasingly globalized and competitive knowledge-economy. Despite their important differences, both approaches identify worldwide convergence trends in education policy: World Society does so by emphasizing institutional isomorphism (i.e. the common form that education systems are acquiring globally), and the GSEA, by focusing on the constitution of a global education agenda.

However, the comparative education field is also fertile in the production of more micro case studies that rather highlight the divergence that prevails in GEP processes. These accounts admit that similar education reforms are spreading globally, but the way in which they translate into local policy practices is rather conflicting, and even contradictory. Overall, they consider that global policy ideas are constantly and actively reinterpreted and modified by a range of political actors that operate at a range of scales – including the national and the local - according to their own symbolic frames and institutional settings. Here, we find from anthropological studies that focus on the cultural and identity factors involved in global education policy interpretation (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Phillips & Stambach, 2008) to historical and sociological institutionalist studies, which focus on the role of path-dependent institutional traditions,

systems of norms, and national regulatory frameworks in the re-contextualization and adaptation of global education policies. (Dobbins, 2011; Maurer, 2012; Takayama, 2012).

The macro and the micro approaches sketched above reach apparently contrasting conclusions, to a great extent, due to the fact that they focus on different stages of the education policy process: policy diffusion and agenda setting, on the one hand, and policy enactment and concrete educational practices on the other. As I argue next, focusing on the policy adoption stage – which, in a global governance scenario, intermediates and mediates more and more determinantly between agenda setting and concrete policy developments- can contribute to have a more complex view of the convergence-divergence debate and, in general, a more comprehensive understanding of GEP processes.

The Policy Adoption Focus

Scholars that focus on policy adoption are less concerned with how global policies get transformed once they have penetrated the local arena, than with *why they penetrate* the local arena in the first place. To them, understanding policy adoption (i.e. the processes, reasons and circumstances that explain how and why policy-makers select and embrace GEPs) is key to account for the changes of scale and the new political interactions that are emerging in more deterritorialized policy processes. Nevertheless, despite the increasing relevance of policy adoption to understand the nature and outcomes of GEP processes, this is a policy moment still understudied.

In comparative education, the 'policy borrowing and lending' literature (see key contributions in Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, 2012b) or the 'mechanisms of globalization effects' (see Dale, 1999) are some of the few frameworks that explicitly aim at understanding the variety of forces and rationales involved in processes of education policy adoption in a global setting. These frameworks reflect on the political, and economic drivers involved in the adoption of GEPs, as well as on the governance technologies that explain the so-called policy transfer, including standardization, externalization, or governance by numbers. They also show that international organizations play an increasingly active role in policy adoption processes, not only by influencing their member-countries' decisions, but also the policies adopted by other international organizations (cf. Grek, 2012; Mundy & Menashy, 2012).

It is well documented that many countries – especially developing countries - adopt global policies and programs because they are externally imposed on them via aid conditionality or binding international agreements. However, more and more often, policy-makers adopt global policies in an apparently voluntary way (Dale, 2005). When this happens, dynamics of persuasion, discursive selectivity, and generation of meaning become more central as factors of policy change. This trend forces us to refine the analytical tools we use in globalization and education studies and, more specifically, pushes us to have a more systematic and theoretical understanding of the role that ideas can play in the study of the nature, dynamics and outcomes of GEPs. As I hope to demonstrate in the following section, taking the role of ideas more seriously in our models of analysis can contribute to shedding light on this particular area of inquiry.

Theorizing the Role of Ideas in Global Education Policy: The Case of Privatization Reforms

Human interpretation and ideas are variables that always frame political outcomes and policy decisions at all levels. Thus, research questions on the role of ideas should not be framed in terms of whether ideas matter or not, as the fact that they matter should be taken for granted. Rather, more relevant questions to be addressed are: *What kinds* of ideas matter more in specific

periods of policy change? *How, when and under what circumstances* do ideas matter more? And, are ideas *autonomous sources of power*?

Different theoretical approaches deal differently with these questions. In this section, I explore how approaches such as institutionalism, rationalism, and constructivism do so, and, in particular, how different scholars in comparative education engage with related premises when analyzing the relationship between globalization and education policy. I specifically reflect on how comparativists have applied these premises to a particular area of education reform: education privatization.

Main approaches

1) Scholars coming from historical and sociological institutionalism, and related traditions, focus on the impact of ideas once they become **institutionalized** at a range of scales. To them, ideas exert influence as elements that are embedded in a broad range of institutions, such as international regimes, systems of values and norms, and policy paradigms (cf. March & Olsen, 2005; Hall, 1993). They look at ideas as embedded in broader and usually stable ideational structures that condition (and even restrict) the capacity of local policy agents in decision-making processes. These types of ideas frame policy-makers behaviors and preferences, and generate shared assumptions among them about how the world works, the nature of problems, and the main policy instruments that are available to them to face these problems (Campbell, 2004).

In comparative education, such a 'structuralist' understanding of the role of ideas influences a very broad range of scholars and theories, starting with world culture theory which, as sketched above, attributes world convergence in education to the successful expansion of western normative frameworks, including values such as human rights, individualism, and democracy. Other scholars use concepts like 'education ideology' (see Schriewer, 2004), 'policy scape' (see Carney, 2009) or 'political imaginaries' (see Robertson, 2005) to refer to transnationally shared ideational frameworks that shape the way policy-makers perceive educational problems and take decisions about educational reform, including the particular policy instruments they are more likely to select and/or reject. Others advocate the necessity to have an even broader understanding of ideational structures, including worldviews, religions, and civilizational projects when it comes to understanding how cultural legacies mediate the effects of globalization in education (Schwinn, 2012; Robertson & Dale, 2013).

How does this perspective apply, in particular, to studies on education privatization? Generally speaking, it leads us to focus on how the emergence of certain 'ideational frameworks' (including policy paradigms, political ideologies, public sentiments and so on) is conducive to the adoption of privatization measures. In developing countries, the prevailing developmental paradigm, the so-called Post-Washington Consensus, is especially conducive to privatization measures, as it encourages governments to explore non-bureaucratic ways of coordinating economic and social activities and to create an environment that favors the private sector acquiring a more dynamic role in economic and societal issues (Van Waeyenberge, 2006). Within this paradigm, managerial proposals that involve the state partnering with the private sector and rethinking the role of the state in the provision of public goods are considered sound.

At the same time, it is remarkable that, in recent decades, the structuration of a range of principled beliefs concerning what is the legitimate role of the state in education has contributed to advance privatization policies both in the North and in the South. In many parts of the world, strong public sentiments against the state operating as a direct provider of services

have been forged, to the point that many consider the welfare state to be facing a crisis of legitimacy, even in Northern European countries (Wiborg, 2012). This shift in public opinion and values is very significant when it comes to understanding the global spread of privatization and related managerial solutions; as Kalimullah et al. (2012) state, "bureaucracy now has few supporters anywhere. Any solution offering a reduction in bureaucracy is likely to be popular" (p.19).

In general, the fact that neoliberalism and related policy discourses have become hegemonic, and form a sort of commonsensical global framework, contributes to the belief in many countries of the world of the inherent superiority of the private sector, or the goodness of performance-based incentives and choice shaping the parameters of education reforms (Carney, 2009; Taylor et al., 2000).

2) For **rationalist** scholars, ideas exert influence as lenses that focus on the 'best option' for policy-makers to maximize their interests, or as coalitional glue to facilitate the cohesion of particular groups. From this perspective, ideas appear to have a lower profile as causal factors of policy change. Their main role is to "alleviate coordination problems arising from the absence of unique equilibrium solutions" (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993, p. 17). According to this approach, actors that participate in policy interactions at different scales are goal-oriented and engage in strategic interactions to maximize their utilities on the basis of given preferences (Risse, 2000). In terms of policy adoption, rationalism would expect local policy-makers to select certain global policies because such policies work or have worked well elsewhere. Thus, policy-makers would be construed as well-informed rational actors that choose internationally tested policy solutions to improve the outcomes of their education systems.

In comparative education, rational choice or methodological individualism are far from being dominant approaches. We find an example in an author like George Pscharopoulos (1990), whose starting point is that education policy-makers in developing countries are rational actors who try "to deliver the best with given resources" and are "concerned with the equitable distribution of benefits associated with educational expansion and provision" (p. 371). Similar conceptions are implicit in the logic of intervention of many international organizations and aid agencies when engaging with local constituencies in policy exchanges. These organizations seem to assume that, by systematizing worldwide evidence and/or doing impact evaluations of a range of interventions, they will demonstrate to national policy-makers what policies 'work' and, accordingly, the latter will opt for adopting and implementing them (cf. Schuller & Burns, 2007; Bruns et al., 2010). According to rationalism, national policy-makers would embrace privatization policies once it has been demonstrated that these policies can contribute to improving students' academic performance and/or the efficiency of education systems.

3) **Constructivist** approaches ascribe more of a leading role to ideas as independent factors in policy change. A core assumption in constructivism is that actors' interests and preferences are social constructions and not objectively given (Haas, 2004; Hay, 2002). These scholars are interested in analyzing ideas functioning as road maps for policy making. In the situations where policy change happens, ideas act more clearly as explanatory variables defining actors' preferences "by stipulating causal patterns or by providing compelling ethical or moral motivations for action" (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993, p. 16).

To many constructivists, ideas are more than simple instruments of human action; they have constitutive power and intrinsic force (Blyth, 2004). To constructivists, ideas are seen as causal factors that influence policy decisions by shaping the perceptions of decision makers, providing

them with rationales for action or filtering interpretations of the external world (Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001). Their research focuses on the role of persuasive arguments, deliberation and communicative action as independent causes of social behavior and political change (Risse, 2004). They do not deny that ideas can work as embedded in institutions, but are more interested in the processes by which ideas that were initially held by a minority become widely adopted and institutionalized (Hasenclever et al., 1996).

In comparative and international education studies, some scholars are focusing on the dynamics of promotion of, and persuasion regarding, global policy ideas (Grek et al., 2009; Ball, 2012; Resnik, 2012; Olmedo, 2013). Many of them focus on how a range of international organizations, knowledge brokers, and policy entrepreneurs try to convince governments of what are the key problems that they need to address and the most effective policy solutions (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012a). Researchers in this specific area observe that global policy ideas do not necessarily become influential because of their inherent quality and rigor, but because of the promotional and framing strategies of the experts backing them (Verger, 2012). In fact, many policy entrepreneurs predispose policy-makers to consider their proposals by making them look like they are scientifically supported, or aligned with 'international good practices' and 'international standards' (Edwards Jr., 2013).

The transnationalization of the education privatization agenda is a good example of how the lack of conclusive evidence regarding the effectiveness of a policy does not prevent it from continuing to be disseminated around the world (Luke, 2003). The promoters of privatization are aware of the criticism and resistance that their ideas may generate in many places. Consequently, to make their preferences more normatively acceptable to a wider audience, they tend to avoid using the 'privatization' label and resort to more appealing concepts such as public-private *partnerships*, school *choice*, *innovative* forms of provision, or school *autonomy* (Robertson et al., 2012). One of the reasons these alternative concepts are more appealing is that they are vague enough so that different policy actors can read almost anything into them. In fact, it has been documented that concepts like public-private partnerships or school autonomy can work as "accommodationist mechanisms" (cf. Linder, 1999) in the sense that a range of different political ideologies may provide them with meaning and feel at ease with the frame in question (Verger, 2012; Verger and Curran, 2014).

Another asset in the hands of privatization entrepreneurs and advocates is that market metaphors are inherently persuasive because most policy-makers have positive experiences with 'the market' as a space for the distribution of goods and services in their daily lives. However, they tend to misinform about the numerous failures that the mechanical transposition of market rules to the delivery of public goods such as education generates. Overall, privatization advocates often resort to the repetition and the misrepresentation of evidence when it comes to selling their preferences (Ball, 2007). As has been argued by Lubiensky (2008) in relation to the US context, one of their most common tactics to create momentum around privatization reform is to produce a sort of 'echochamber effect' around a small, usually low-quality and unrepresentative sample of studies.

Focusing on the role of ideas does not mean neglecting that the influence of policy ideas is contingent on the institutional setting in which they are produced and delivered. To most constructivists, the symbolic and economic capitals of the organizations backing new policy ideas impact significantly on the social perception and credibility of these ideas. It is noteworthy that the most successful policy entrepreneurs are usually based in international organizations, such as the World Bank or the OECD, that are located at the interstices of a range

of influential policy networks. These organizations provide them with sufficient resources to package and disseminate their ideas effectively as well as the channels to directly access key policy-makers in their member-states (Campbell, 2004).

To conclude, constructivists assume, counter to the rationalist assumption, that policy-makers do not have perfect information when making their policy choices and that, in fact, their knowledge on education policy matters is likely to be impressionistic and incomplete (Hay, 2001). In general, according to them, global policies are not widely adopted because they are the best (or even a good) choice, but because they are *perceived* as such by key decision-makers. Even though this is a valid point to understand the selection of certain policy options by policy-makers, in the next section I will argue that other elements and contingencies need to also be addressed to understand policy adoption in its complexity.

Placing Policy Ideas in Context

Despite the constructivist effort to place ideas at the center of analytical models, there is the risk of isolating them from material factors and extra-semiotic forces. According to Jessop (2010), the role of ideas and, more broadly speaking, semiotic analysis should be seen as a heuristic device to reduce complexity in the study of reality, or as an entry point to understand reality, but not as an end in itself. In addition, the constructivist emphasis on conceiving ideas as causal factors runs the risk of modeling ideas as independent variables of policy change in a too linear and positivistic way. Overall, a more dialectical understanding of the relationship between ideas, institutional change, and strategically selective contexts would be more appropriate.

Campbell (2004) has done a remarkable job when it comes to advancing a more relational approach on this terrain. His work theorizes on how different types of ideas, such as policy paradigms, programs, frames, and public sentiments, which interpellate to very different domains of reality (the micro and the macro, the normative and the policy-oriented), interact in processes of institutional change. Paraphrasing him, new policy proposals will be more likely to penetrate education systems if entrepreneurs can present them in a way that appears to translate well into the prevailing national or regional regulatory framework and policy paradigm, and into the normative sentiments of decision-makers and key stakeholders.

As I show in this section, to analyze policy adoption and, specifically, to understand why external policy ideas are selected and retained in particular places, we need to look more closely at contextual variables of a different nature, with a focus on those of a political and institutional nature. As mentioned above, 'context' is one of those concepts often used - and abused - in comparative education. It carries strong semiotic connotations and its meaning is often taken for granted; consequently, in much research it is rarely defined and systematized. The strategic-relational approach (cf. Jessop, 2001; Hay, 2001) is helpful to think about what we specifically mean by context and, more importantly, how we operationalize it in research on GEP.

The strategic-relational approach forces us to think of 'context' as a conjunction of semiotic and non-semiotic *strategically inscribed selectivities* (of a political, institutional, and economic nature) that may privilege or discriminate against certain ideas (and the carriers of these ideas) over others (Hay, 2001). Strategic selectivities need to be differentiated from broader social *structures*, such as the prevailing form of the capitalist system, the accumulation regime, or the related policy paradigm (Dale, 2005). Strategic selectivities are variables that are more contingent and contextually inscribed in nature and that, among other properties, mediate strategically in the reception of new or external policy ideas. In the following lines I present those among them that, according to recent literature, seem to intercede in a more decisive way in processes of

education privatization reform. They are: government ideology, administrative and regulatory viability, political institutions, domestic political contention, and periods of crises.

1) Government ideology. Policy-makers are more inclined to adopt policy solutions that fit within the ideology of the government for which they work or that they represent. According to Taylor et al. (2000), political ideology is one of the main reasons why nations do not deliver equally in the GEP field. These authors show that, for instance, governmental ideologies represent a key filter when it comes to adopting OECD recommendations on educational policy. In the case of the privatization agenda, this would mean that market-liberal, or liberal-democratic governments would be *a priori* more inclined to adopt pro-privatization measures such as promoting school choice, contracting-out, etc., than social-democratic ones. However, in some cases, this premise needs to be more nuanced since, as I develop below, the left vs. right cleavage is losing weight as an *explanans* of privatization reforms.

Despite the modern education privatization agenda, with its emphasis on competitive financing, partnerships with the private sector and choice, being initiated by the so-called 'New Right' in the 1980s, many social democratic governments are advancing privatization measures alike today. Understanding the evolution of social-democratic thinking is key to explaining this apparent ideological dissolution. In recent years, many social-democratic governments, especially in Europe, have moved closer to pro-market ideas because they genuinely believe that, by adopting them, they can contribute to improve public education, public health, or the state pension system (Wiborg, 2012). Social-democratic parties are concerned with the legitimacy crisis of the welfare state and the increasing social dissatisfaction with the bureaucratization of public services – in fact, some of their more prominent international leaders even reproduce publicly the generalized belief that "the pubic sector is bad at management" (see declarations of Gordon Brown in Ball, 2007, p. 4). For them, market reforms are seen as an opportunity to transform, but also to protect the universal welfare state in the face of its public legitimacy crisis. By doing so, social-democrats expect to keep on using the welfare state as their most valuable political and institutional weapon in electoral disputes (Klitgaard, 2007).

2) Administrative and regulatory viability. Peter Hall (1993) conceived 'administrative viability' as a key aspect in his analysis of the reception of Keynesianism in different country settings. This variable implies that new policy ideas are most likely to be taken up by policy-makers if they perceive these ideas as technically workable and fitting within their budgetary, administrative and time-horizon constraints and capacities (Kingdon, 2002).

Beyond technical capacities, regulatory obstacles, of both a legislative and a normative nature, are also in the calculus of policy-makers when considering borrowing external models. Precisely for this reason, according to Maroy (2012), Belgium and France behave very differently when it comes to incorporating the quasi-market model into their education systems, despite both countries receiving similar pressures to engage in such a transnational model. In Belgium, quasi-markets are advancing much faster due to the fact that freedom of choice is inscribed in the country's constitution and is strongly valued by families. In France, in contrast, there are numerous rules that restrict freedom of choice, and many families value the republican school as a cultural melting pot, even above their right to choose a school.

On occasion, policy-makers will be more receptive to external policies if they are consistent with previous (positive) experiences in their countries. In India, for instance, the PPPs idea – which is being promoted by a very active transnational advocacy coalition – has smoothly penetrated

into the national education debate as the country has twenty years of experience with *partnerships* in non-education sectors such as infrastructure, water and solid waste management. Thus, for Indian educational policy-makers, if PPPs have been technically viable in other sectors, they would have a great potential to work in education (Verger & Vanderkaaij, 2012).

3) **Political institutions.** The rules of the game and the prevailing political institutions can work in very different – and contradictory ways - when it comes to advancing or resisting the adoption of GEPs. In some countries, like Denmark or The Netherlands, the political party realm is so fragmented that governments usually need to be formed by multiple party coalitions. These coalitions can be so ideologically diverse that it may be difficult for them to agree on drastic measures, as education privatization can be. Thus, these political systems are more conducive to institutional stability than those where governmental politics are led by a two-party system (Kjaer & Pedersen, 2001).

Similarly, some governments in some countries are more effective at advancing ambitious education reforms than others as a consequence of the institutional rules for decision-making and, specifically, the role and presence of veto points in political processes. For instance, from an ideological perspective, the U.S. would seem more inclined to adopt a national voucher system than a welfare-equalitarian country like Sweden. However, the chain of decisions required in American politics has such a length and complexity that, in the U.S., voucher proposals have been several times interrupted at the Federal level in the last decades. In contrast, Sweden's political system, in which the executive and legislative branches of government are mutually dependent and that does not offer many veto opportunities to interest groups, has been able to advance an ambitious voucher reform in a short time (Klitgaard, 2008).

For their part, countries that have witnessed a high level of education decentralization are more conducive to privatization trends. Quite often, local governments, especially in developing countries, lack the capacity to deliver education in an effective way, which leads to middle class families exiting the public sector and enrolling their children in private schools. Furthermore, as shown by Theresa Adriao et al. (2009) in the case of Brazil, local governments tend to have insufficient technical capacities to manage education systems in all their complexity, and many of them end up buying 'reform packages' and education consulting services from private consultancy firms. They, thus, become more vulnerable to, for instance, the marketing strategies of so-called "school improvement corporations", such as America's Choice, which promise to their potential clients "We have the results you are looking for: improved student achievement, higher test scores, increased graduation rates, fewer discipline problems, and more effective leadership and teaching" (Ball, 2012, p. 96).

4) Contentious politics and legitimation. Governments may engage in GEP processes as a way to attract political capital and neutralize internal opposition to education reform. This is the case of countries that adopt international institutions' recommendations as a way to gain leverage in education reform debates at the domestic level, and to advance certain changes that would otherwise be contested by oppositional groups (Martens et al., 2009). On occasion, governments strategically focus on the adoption of those specific external recommendations that are closest to their particular preferences; to them, the supposed neutrality of global policies can contribute to legitimate their own political agenda (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012b) [1].

It is also quite common that governments recur to external actors as a tiebreaker in moments of great uncertainty or polarization in education debates at the country level. According to Steiner-Khamsi (2012b), when education reform processes get trapped in highly politicized public

debates, domestic actors may invoke an external source of authority to unblock the situation. This external source (whether it is an international organization, and INGO, or a consultancy firm) may achieve this objective by working as a coalition-builder and/or as the provider of a third-best solution.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, the government adopted a School-Based Management (SBM) reform by invoking international standards, although the main driver of the reform was, in fact, internal legitimation. According to Komatsu (2013), the SBM reform allowed the Bosnia-Herzegovina government to present itself as a reformer in tune with European standards, thereby responding to the citizens' aspirations for European integration, at the same time that it portrayed itself in front of the public as a government that, through SBM ideas, aims to depoliticize education in a post-conflict situation. Nevertheless, it was also the case that the government ended up implementing SBM only very superficially and without losing its direct control over schools (Komatsu, 2013).

It should be noticed that not only governments engage in global policy talk to legitimate their particular interests. Domestic private interests can also be very effective when it comes to the mobilization of external ideas to generate education reform pressure. For instance, a country like Thailand - with strong societal support for public education - ended up importing a voucher system in early-childhood education as a consequence of the collective action of private kindergarten owners. Kindergarten owners in this country invested a significant amount of resources in sponsoring the vouchers idea as a business survival strategy. Nonetheless, they convinced local political elites of the convenience of adopting this education-financing model by framing it as an "internationally fashionable policy" with potential positive equity implications (Ho, 2006, p. 67).

Of course, the pressure of non-state actors can go in the opposite direction and lobby against new international privatization trends. In Argentina, although for reasons of a very different nature, both the teachers unions and the main association of private universities campaigned against the liberalization of education in the context of the World Trade Organization's services negotiations. As a consequence of this, the minister of education vetoed the possibility of Argentina opening their education sector to international commercial providers in the framework of these trade negotiations (Verger, 2009).

5) Crisis. Crises are moments of policy variation in many domains. It has been acknowledged that there are more possibilities for new ideas to act as roadmaps in periods of crisis and uncertainty (Richardson, 2005). Policy-makers perceive importing new policies from elsewhere as more necessary when the problems in the education system are critical, or perceived as critical. Warming signs in this realm include a high level of internal dissatisfaction with the education system on the part of families, teachers, etc.; the collapse or inadequacy of educational provision; negative results in international evaluations such as PISA; and so on (Phillips & Ochs, 2003).

International and domestic policy entrepreneurs tend to use crises – or critical situations more broadly speaking - as political opportunities for education policy change. Several scholars have recently paid attention to how the confusion generated by 'natural disasters' in both Haiti and New Orleans have leveled the terrain for neoliberal education reformers to advance privatization and school choice reforms (Atasay & Delavan, 2012; Buras, 2013). To give another example, in developing contexts, the fact that many countries are still far from reaching the 'Education For All' (EFA) goals due to the insufficient resources available is used by

privatization advocates to introduce a sort of urgency reform pressure to convince governments and donors that they need to bring the private sector into education delivery, and see it as a key ally to achieve EFA (Srivastava, 2010).

From the point of view of policy adoption, it may look like "context" restricts the range of possible options available to policy-makers operating at a range of scales (regional, national and local) over a particular time horizon (Hay, 2001). However, what many of the contextual dimensions identified here have in common is that they reveal policy-makers to be active producers of meaning and key active agents in the GEP sequence. To some extent, their policy choices are related to the complementary (symbolic, political and material) gains and clout that certain global policies come with, and to the way these policies fit within their technical capacities, policy preferences and political interests.

To Conclude: Taking Ideas (More) Seriously

The conceptual and theoretical framework sketched in this article invites us to look at the constitutive and causal role of ideas in processes of education policy change and policy adoption in a more systematic way. It provides us with the necessary elements to explore what types of ideas, in what way and under what circumstances, can contribute to initiate processes of education policy reform in a global governance scenario. Among other potentialities, paying closer attention to the multiple roles of ideas in GEP processes and, specifically, to their application in dynamics of policy adoption can contribute to unraveling the macro vs. the micro, convergence vs. divergence, local vs. global and related dichotomies that so often stretch the globalization debate in comparative education (cf. Chisholm, 2012; Robertson, 2012).

I have also argued that focusing on ideas does not necessarily mean embracing an 'idealist' ontology or a naïf version of constructivism, which would understand that specific types of ideas – such as arguments and deliberation - can be isolated as causal factors in processes of policy and institutional change. In this respect, I have argued that ideas are not only agency-sensitive or micro-level factors in essence; they also need to be understood as constitutive of broader structures and institutions (in the form of, for instance, policy paradigms) with causal powers over actors' preferences and decisions. In other words, ideas can operate as both structure and agency, action and condition. Furthermore, I have suggested using ideas as an entry point to the analysis of reality, but not as something that is commensurable with reality. Ideas, rather, need to be conceived as part of 'causal configurations' (cf. Pawson & Tilley, 1997) that interact in an analytically distinguishable – although ontologically embedded - way with strategic actions, social events and contextual selectivities in bringing about policy change.

I have illustrated the application of this framework by looking at the global spread of education privatization policies. I have shown that, globally speaking, the currently prevailing policy and development paradigm is conducive to the adoption of privatization measures of a different nature. This trend is reinforced by the rhetoric and framing strategies that a range of influential private education entrepreneurs and advocates display to make their policy options more acceptable to a broader audience. Furthermore, I have given examples of the contextually inscribed selectivities that contribute to select and retain, but also to reject, different elements of the transnational privatization agenda in particular places.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the global privatization agenda is not only about promoting the adoption of specific policies and practices; it is broader in scope and, in fact, politically more ambitious than that. Its main aim is to promote a drastic and paradigmatic

change both in the goals of education systems (putting global competitiveness, and economic efficiency at the center of state priorities in education) and in the expected role of the state in education (from a provider state to an evaluative state). Inevitably, once such a paradigmatic change becomes more broadly institutionalized, more policy-makers worldwide will be more receptive to the adoption of particular privatization measures, especially to those that fit better within the new goals and globally accepted forms of education provision.

Despite the theoretical and epistemological focus of the framework presented in this article, its application has important methodological implications. Taking ideas more seriously implies having to pay more attention to the carriers of these ideas, and tracking the policy networks they constitute (cf. Ball, 2012; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009). It also implies having a better understanding of how policy entrepreneurs introduce new policy ideas in global education agendas, and frame and disseminate them across different fields, organizations, and regions (cf. Grek et al., 2009; Verger, 2012). It also requires us to have in-depth knowledge of the particular contexts in which these ideas are being adopted, as a way to capture how multiple contextual contingencies operate in a strategically selective way by favoring certain actors, ideas, and discourses over others (cf. Hay, 2002). Finally, methodologically speaking, it is worth mentioning that comparative education is potentially well-suited to analyzing the impact of global education policy ideas, as comparative analysis is one of the most appropriate strategies for understanding why, to what degree, and under which particular circumstances the same transnational idea is more influential in some particular settings than in others.

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Notes
[1] See how this premise applies in the way several European governments have approached the Bologna process in Huisman et al. (2004), and Amaral and Magalhaes (2004).

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