Time in Education Policy Transfer: The Seven Temporalities of Global School Reform

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'This book is about reforms that travel across countries.' Steiner-Khamsi's opening gambit situates her inquiry firmly within comparative education's constitutive terrain. Yet the straightforward framing masks a significant theoretical pivot. By foregrounding time as an analytical dimension, the book sets out to reframe the study of policy circulation. The resulting analysis hints, with uncanny timeliness, at a bold conclusion: that neoliberalism has exhausted itself.

Throughout the opening chapters, Steiner-Khamsi introduces a colourful case to establish the puzzle that underpins the book's rationale. Around the turn of the millennium, the entire Mongolian parliament, together with all senior ministry officials, went on a study tour to New Zealand. With the blessing and financial support of the Asian Development Bank, they were to learn how to reform the country's state apparatus according to neoliberal precepts. Out with the cronyism, nepotism and bribes; in with market efficiency. As Steiner-Khamsi reminds us, not without irony, New Zealand's early experiments with New Public Management had by then already spiralled into an unruly administrative sprawl – counting '300 separate central agencies and 49 tiny ministries' (12), not to mention the numerous institutions in charge of education. The neoliberal newspeak proved seductive nevertheless and soon Mongolian policy makers parroted the then-popular talk of school vouchers. Its appeal perplexes even more when considering that school choice, a hobby horse of that early neoliberalism, was simply unworkable in rural Mongolia. With schools sparsely distributed across vast distances and a population of nomadic herders, neither the supply nor the demand side could realistically conform to the principles of market optimisation.

Striking paradoxes, like those plaguing Mongolia's policy pilgrimage, allow the author to dispel a first, all too obvious solution to the book's conundrum: whether a reform takes hold cannot be explained by its effectiveness. Even dysfunctional policies linger on and spread, like 'ghosts that haunt schools' (57). Highly funded pilot projects,

intended to spread excellence through invariably elusive spillover effects, live on as ‘magnets for qualified teachers’ (98) and resourceful parents, exacerbating rather than tackling inequality. Yet reform strategies that rely on selectively ‘funding a few at the expense of the masses’ (98) have proliferated nonetheless. The same applies to standardised testing, introduced to hold schools accountable but seldom yielding more than administrative theatre. Hence, 'innovations don't travel because they work, and not all that travels actually sticks' (35). But what, then, explains the travel of education reforms?

1. From Borrowing to Timing

In a significant shift from the approach that has defined much of her previous scholarship, Steiner-Khamsi's latest book no longer explains what travels or sticks primarily via external reference points. Taking a cue from German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, she has long cultivated a line of research that focused on the policy-borrowing between nation states. The concept of externalisation (Schriewer, 1988) was central to this effort, denoting the dynamics whereby references to model countries or policy choices abroad serve to validate domestic reform. Rendering the abstract notion operational for empirical inquiry, the approach equipped scholars to identify how reformers seek legitimacy when presenting their inherently selective choices as necessary.

This policy-borrowing approach takes a conspicuous backseat in *Time in Education Policy Transfer*. Where externalisation still features in the book, it now serves primarily as a counterpoint or aid to the focus on time. Studying policy-borrowing proved effective to highlight how emulating league-leaders (like textbook case Finland) helps to overcome reform deadlocks. But one suspects that this research agenda ultimately spotlighted a group of actors – those compiling the league tables – who exceeded its ability to accommodate them.

The book's temporal turn sets out to address this gap. It openly aims for a more comprehensive understanding of the policy process, including who stands to gain or lose from its outcome. In the panorama revealed by the book’s temporal lens, one class of winners indeed towers far above all others. International organisations, the OECD and World Bank first and foremost, are portrayed as actors who do far more than facilitate policy emulation through their rankings and comparative data. Rather,

they emerge as ‘first movers’ (72) who actively construct the temporal frame within which reforms become possible. The newfound emphasis on time thus substantiates, with impressive empirical command, a hypothesis that recurs as an insistent leitmotiv through recent comparative education studies: that educational reforms involve a fundamental redistribution of power, with international organisations as their main architects. The thus burgeoning ‘Global Education Governing Complex’ (61) of international organisations and foundations might lack the regulatory power available to national governments. But the book systematically demonstrates how it sets the rhythm and timelines of reform waves that nation states must reckon with in order to remain credible participants in their global networks.

Setting such rhythms and timelines is no abstract exercise. Examining policy in its material form, Steiner-Khamsi's book is a forceful demonstration of why instruments matter – and not just actors or outcomes. Her analysis draws on Pierre Lascoumes and Patrick Le Galès’ instrumentation approach to lay bare a ‘politics of tools’, showing how choice for or against a particular policy instrument betrays assumptions about the roles the governing and the governed are asked to play. Charting how accountability measures reshaped governance on a planetary scale, the book documents how such assumptions are never settled, once and for all, but are continuously renegotiated through struggles over how to interpret and deploy the tools of governance. Steiner-Khamsi has a knack for spotting the creative repurposing these struggles provoke, and her book offers a rich catalogue of examples. Such repurposing can emerge as contestation from below, inverting the policy intentions of imposed instruments – for instance, when teachers’ resistance converts performance-based pay into a collective bonus, to be distributed democratically among all; or more subtly, when Mongolia’s officials, in a moment of artful *realpolitik*, pass off elective courses as school vouchers in an effort to appease donors. But she also finds resourcefulness upstream, where discursive shifts enable international organisations to experiment with different policy bundles while leaving prior commitments intact – as when decentralisation is repackaged as school autonomy to appeal simultaneously to efficiency reformers and grassroots advocates, thereby reprising post-colonial patterns of working around, rather than through, national governments.

International assessments, like PISA, are shown to aggregate countries into networks of comparison, where participation signals membership of an international community.

They have also spawned an itinerant class of experts, evaluators and consultants, who in turn develop a vested interest in perpetuating these tools, a circularity the author is careful to point out. As the instruments are shown to assemble their global constituencies, gathering the actors necessary to sustain them, Steiner-Khamsi illustrates how modern school education is shaped by a constellation that extends far beyond its original, national context. In doing so, the book converges with a research agenda that (predominantly) British policy sociologists have pursued over the past decades. Their scholarship has laid out in detail how transnational actors seek to establish what counts as an educational problem or its solution, whether corporate philanthropy or the coordination and benchmarking efforts of the European Union. Steiner-Khamsi's book jolts new life into this agenda by showcasing the potential of an often overlooked analytical dimension – time – whilst pinpointing a viable path to extend its scope to the digital era.

As a European sociologist, however, one is left wondering what to make of the absent European Union in the book's analysis. Perhaps its absence provides a silent, if telling indication that the empirical relevance of the EU is at best secondary. Read as such, the book starkly reflects Europe's predicament of having to inhabit a global constellation it originated, but which no longer reserves it a clear place. Be that as it may, a comparison with the EU's soft governance might nonetheless have proven instructive, not least to productively complicate the book's portrayal of international organisations as autonomous 'first movers'.

Though the European Union's institutional architecture might appear monolithic from outside, its internal governance proves far more divided. Even after decades of intensive scholarship, the boundary between supranational authority and intergovernmental control remains empirically contested, raising the question of whether EU institutions truly author policy or rather provide venues where member states negotiate and legitimise their agendas. Can the same be said for the international organisations at the centre of Steiner-Khamsi's analysis?

The book offers a compelling account of the institutional one-upmanship and strategic complementarity among these organisations, from the OECD's and World Bank's challenge to UNESCO's authority and their boundary work dividing 'developed' from 'developing' countries, to their rivalry with the 'consultocracy' (50) of McKinsey and others. The book depicts them as drivers of a global script, endowing reforms with

institutional legitimacy and making them portable across contexts. They authorise reforms to follow a template, lending them the credibility necessary for diffusion. But authorisation is not yet authorship. The book stops short of interrogating who precisely staffs the writers' room. Are the World Bank and OECD autonomous writers of education's global script? Or are they stages upon which nation states perform their reform ambitions, perhaps dressed up as technical neutrality or global consensus? Granted, these questions may stretch well beyond the book's remit: a study centred on policy transfer need not answer queries about institutional origins. Yet they seem essential for understanding not merely how policies travel but why certain policies travel at all. Future work might aim to explore further what (or who) moves the first movers, homing in on their internal decision-making, lest they appear as unmoved movers who merely fuel the diffusion engine.

2. After Neoliberalism?

The reorientation to time unfolds through seven temporalities, from which the book derives its subtitle. Some of these temporalities mobilise familiar intuitions (the present historical context that makes a reform thinkable or the future projections that justify its adoption), insights that readers versed in path dependence theory or Jens Beckert's work on promissory legitimacy will recognise. Others reformulate the culturalist undertone of policy-borrowing theory, its emphasis on situated meaning-making, into the book's new temporal language (the timing of reception across different contexts). Still others turn to less explored variables of the reform process: the chronological sequence in which reforms unfold, the lifespan of reforms, their aging as they become institutionalised, and the tempo of their global diffusion. As Steiner-Khamsi notes, the enumeration is not set out to be exhaustive. The seven temporalities act as heuristic devices, each generating its own research questions. As such, the book's scholarly analysis doubles as a blueprint for future policy research.

Collectively, these seven temporalities allow Steiner-Khamsi to trace how a renewed surge of reforms spread during the 2000s, following and reacting against earlier experiments in marketisation. The reforms carried a double mandate: to promote school autonomy and install accountability through the techniques of testing and reporting. They operated along two distinct but convergent tracks, granting freedom while imposing scrutiny: admonishing schools to find their unique pedagogical profile

but also naming-and-shaming them when test results disappointed. Or: granting schools the leeway to hire and fire teachers, while strictly monitoring the learning outcomes of their students. This second reform peak and its global aftermath constitute the empirical substrate of the book, which makes a methodical case for considering the disparate range of policies that followed as substantially *different* from the deregulatory cost-cutting of the eighties and nineties.

Such a claim is of course not exactly new. Already by the close of the decade, the neoliberal project was said to have shifted gear, relinquishing overt control for internalised, more pervasive forms of governance (Rose, 1999). State power was claimed to operate in a hands-off manner, enlisting actors to discipline themselves, rather than through direct regulation. Steiner-Khamsi, however, makes a markedly different point. She underlines how outcomes-based accountability evolved into a form of statehood that is anything but hands-off: 'with the support of an army of well-paid managers, evaluators, and affiliated agencies,' the state 'establishes standards, develops indicators, and tests to monitor the achievement of the standards' (34), calling for reports at all levels of its administration. Rather than trusting in self-regulating markets, she notes, this second reform wave 'reinstated the state's authority' (214) around the globe, in an attempt to correct for the quality loss caused by crude liberalisation.

To recognise the state's resurgence is not to deny that the welfare state has been hollowed out with enduring consequences, nor to ignore market involvement in education. It acknowledges that this new modality of statehood typically governs through hybrid networks of state and market actors, effectively blurring the distinction between public and private. But the 'evaluative state' (134) that Steiner-Khamsi portrays does complicate a straightforward equation of such hybridisation with neoliberalism's persistence. Should we still invoke neoliberalism when the principle by which value is determined shifts from market back to state? If education's quality is no longer left to emerge from the aggregated choices of consumer-parents, but actively defined through national and supranational standard-setting, what analytical purchase does the neoliberal label then retain? The book's most welcome contribution may be this willingness to unsettle established diagnoses. Amidst recent political shifts, its scepticism certainly strikes one as particularly timely.

Such scepticism is on clearest display when Steiner-Khamsi delineates the historical arc of reform waves through their shifting accountability regimes. Whether mandating what schools must provide (inputs like class sizes and textbooks), rewarding those that parents choose (output, measured by enrolment) or measuring what students achieve (outcomes captured by test scores): states have always held schools to account, her argument goes, though the mechanisms shift. Their historical sequence reveals statehood and accountability regimes co-evolving in recursive patterns, each phase emerging as a reaction to its predecessor's perceived failures while inadvertently creating conditions for subsequent transformation. The book reconstructs how bureaucratic excess and ballooning expenditure bred market belief, whose fiascos across the globe invited standards-based interventionism, creating new rigidities for reformers to overcome. Market competition figures in this sequence as a mode of governance, as a historically specific method used to bring education to account, not as the state's perennial antithesis. Hence, to label the interventionist school-autonomy-with-accountability reform still a neoliberal movement is deemed a historical inaccuracy: 'the contrary applies' (133).

Steiner-Khamsi's conclusion is bound to invite contestation. To suggest that recent reforms transcend neoliberalism, rather than exemplify it, dissents from entrenched positions, and I suspect more than a few readers might bridle at the mere suggestion. Yet the question her book raises is also, if not especially, pertinent for them: when we insist on neoliberalism's persistence, on its 'strange non-death' (173), does the label still help to distinguish what proves distinctive about contemporary changes? Or does it collapse meaningful differences into familiar patterns? When continuity becomes the default interpretation, the analysis risks becoming rehearsal. In this sense, the book's temporal reorientation masks a provocation for future scholarship, using time as a vehicle to test whether our conceptual repertoire remains fit for purpose.

This test becomes most acute in Steiner-Khamsi's treatment of platforms, the fourth accountability mechanism she identifies after state bureaucracy, market competition and standards. She examines platforms ranging from social media's volatile opinion markets to the data dashboards curated by international organisations. Her answer, admittedly 'more speculative than empirical' (16), lays out in condensed fashion the book's overall argument, albeit with an unexpected twist. As the global governing complex refits and expands the toolkit of the previous reform wave, now to promote

transparency and citizen engagement, platforms gain centrality and set out new lines of accountability.

What proves most distinctive about this platform-based accountability, according to Steiner-Khamsi, is its potential to redirect scrutiny toward the state itself. Her understanding of platforms emphasises their totalising potential: everyone and everything can be measured and subjected to perpetual scrutiny, *the state itself included*. For social media specifically, this unexpected reversal – governments falling under the same oversight that they impose on others – veers closer to Pierre Rosanvallon's theory of counter-democracy (2008) than Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism. Platforms appear as engines of distrust, sites where citizens pressure their decision-makers. As depoliticised standards yield to online politicisation, the evaluative state gives way to an 'engaged' state (137), positioning citizens ambiguously as its co-creators *and* chief critics. Platforms thus create the analytical leeway for researching a voice – that of public opinion – which in previous accountability regimes would hardly register, perhaps as market preference, if at all.

Another actor, however, remains curiously absent from this account. Platforms themselves operate under an entirely different accountability regime. Or rather, they allow their operators to largely deflect accountability altogether. Congressional hearings of the Tech Titans, court battles over platform liability, ongoing struggles to hold them accountable for harm caused: the significance of these confrontations does not appear to register in the book's analysis. That platforms excel at evading the very accountability they supposedly enable represents an irony left unexplored (Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024). So too is the paradox whereby the promise of government transparency through digital platforms coincides with algorithmic opacity and other mechanisms that diffuse, distribute and deny accountability.

Through platforms, accountability is devolved to users and their behaviour, whilst the organising authority can recede from view. By way of conclusion, perhaps this then might be a useful suggestion: hitherto scholarship has typically approached platforms as quasi-states, as sovereign spaces operating beyond traditional regulatory reach. The inverse question, examining what happens when states adopt platform logic, thus avoiding accountability, remains largely under-examined. Steiner-Khamsi's book furnishes the conceptual tools to start pursuing it.

References

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