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Ideas, interests and policy formation in the European education policy

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Abstract

Education policy, traditionally a fortress of nation and state building processes, is now being challenged by the emergence of a new dimension at European level. The overall concept of education, linked till the end of the 1990s to workers mobility and to European identity, has been redefined after the Lisbon strategy of 2000 as a tool for productivity, efficiency and competitiveness of Europe. However, it is not clear which factors can account for this shift. This paper has three aims. First, it briefly examines the historical developments of EU competences in education and training, in order to identify changes in terms of policy and content of education. Second, it critically engages with the main explanations for these changes, broadly belonging to the neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist integration theories and contends that these approaches provide an insufficient explanation of the drivers and mechanisms behind this change. Therefore, the paper suggests that a key to better understanding the changes in education may lie in the adoption of a more ideational approach that looks at the role of ideas in shaping political outcomes.

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Marina Cino Pagliarello

1. Introduction

Education and training systems in Europe have been closely linked to nation's building processes (Bartolini, 2005) and have been always perceived as a sensitive area of national diversity, part of the right/obligations relationship between States and citizens in supporting national economies (de Wit and Verhoeven, 2001; Corbett, 2003) with the European level's responsibility mainly focused on mobility and promotion of European identity. However, since the end of the 1990's, the competences of the European Union have increased and the European Commission is now *de facto* involved in the formulation of a cognitive, normative and regulative model of European education policy (Jakobi et al., 2010; Martens et al. 2010).

The Lisbon summit in 2000 is considered a *watershed* in European education and training policy (Gornitzka, 2005): through the standard setting and the monitoring instruments implemented with the Open Method of Coordination (henceforth, OMC), the European Commission has extended its policy capacity and is now able to recommend nation States to change their education policies (Nagel et al. 2010 : 5; Jakobi et al., 2010). Moreover, the *Bologna (1999) and Copenhagen (2002) processes* for higher education and vocational education and training, respectively, not only linked education to EU economic policies (Walkenhorst, 2008) but they have also triggered a high degree of transnationality and interactions between experts, networks and civil servants. Finally, the *Europe 2020* strategy of 2010 integrates education with jobs, growth and innovation strategies of the EU (Corbett, 2012). As also recently stressed during a conference in London by Xavier Pratt Monnè – deputy director of DG Education and Culture - “we cannot tell Member States what to do, but we can tell them how they are doing and what they should do to improve their education systems” (December 2013). This claim suggests that integration in the area of education is likely to become one of the most ambitious and dynamic areas in European integration.

What explains these transformations? How did the agenda status of education rise at the European level, given the European Union's lack of legal jurisdiction? Why have Member States, that still have the exclusive competence in education matters, agreed to delegate some aspect of it to the EU level?

This paper examines these changes and argues that they pose a challenging puzzle for the research agenda of mainstream EU integration theories. Indeed, though changes in the global economy may provide a plausible explanation for education being conceived as a tool for employment and global economic competitiveness, the remainder of the explanation comes from understanding *how and why* the challenges of globalization have been problematized and politicized through a European policy framework and not instead within single Member States. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical account of EU education policy with reference to EU integration theories.

Although the debate around the so labeled “Europeanization” of education – where the term here refers to the process of enhanced cooperation and coordination at the European level - is still at its infancy (Jakobi et al.2010; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2011), leading explanations

can be grouped under the “two families of integration theory” literature (Schimmelfenning and Rittberger, 2006): supranationalism and intergovernmentalism. Both families are discussed in this paper. While supranational explanations have highlighted spill-over dynamics and have emphasized the entrepreneurial role of the European Commission in increasing its capacity in coordinating education policies at European level (Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg, 2011), the theoretical insight of intergovernmentalism focuses on bargaining processes between Member States that decide to delegate sovereignty to the EU according their preferences that are domestically determined (Moravcsik, 1993; 1998).

The fact that European education policy is intergovernmentally constructed and that Member States remain the main actors in this policy field is not contested and neither is the fact that the “Europeanization” of education incorporates supranational dynamics as well. However, I contend that relying exclusively on a supranational or intergovernmental approach is not sufficient to fully capture and explain the policy process. Rather, drawing from a constructivist epistemology where the basic claim is that interests and preferences are social constructions that are not objectively given (Hay, 2002), this paper attempts to overcome the dichotomy between these two theoretical strands and to present an alternative approach which focuses on the role of ideas in politics (Hall, 1993; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001; Campbell, 2002) thus to complement more traditional supranationalist and intergovernmentalist explanations.

To reach this intent, the paper will be structured as follows. The second section describes the historical development of EU competences in education in the last forty years. Drawing from EU official documents and secondary scholarly sources, the section provides evidence of a shift of European education policy in terms of policy aims and processes. The third section interrogates the two theoretical approaches of European Integration studies - supranationalism and intergovernmentalism - and critically discusses to what extent they fit in explaining these changes. If, on the one side, the supranational explanations show their limitation in explaining why more integration has not occurred, on the other, the intergovernmentalist approach is limited due its rationalist assumptions about fixed preferences and material interests affecting these changes. In the fourth section, the paper seeks to propose an alternative framework and suggests to look at the role of ideas and policy paradigm as a possible explanatory variable in understanding the transformations of EU education policy. A final section concludes.

2. The evolution of the EU agenda for education: from social mobility to European competitiveness

Vocational training was one of the original foundations of EU education policy. Indeed, while there were no provisions for general education, Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome of 1957 (European Economic Community, 1957) stated that the Council of Ministers of the Community would lay down - as a proposal of the Commission and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee - *‘general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy capable of contributing to the harmonious development both of the national economies and of the common market’* (art. 128) . As required by the same article, the Commission laid down in 1961 the content of the general principles, setting their number at ten (Council of Ministers, 1963). These principles contained the commitment to give all people the opportunity to

receive adequate training in order to be able to exercise free choice of occupation and place of work, and to reach new and higher levels of employment. In addition, the common principles stated clearly that vocational training was largely left to Member States, with the Commission acting as a facilitator to allow comparability of vocational qualifications. However, this attempt to create a common vocational training policy failed, as Member States, in particular Germany and France that had well developed vocational training systems, did not agree to cede powers to the European Commission (Cedefop, 2004). Education in its initial stage of the European integration process was mainly geared toward economic cooperation and the measures taken were only aimed at facilitating the free movements of workers (Sprokkereef, 1993) and at implementing the four market freedoms – capital, people, services and goods (European Commission 1989).

From the 1980s onwards, EU education policy entered a new stage that has been identified as the “supranationalist turn” (Trondal, 2002 : 9; Walkenhorst, 2008). Also because of the broader programme promoted by Jacques Delors to make social policy one of the main items of the European agenda, there seemed to be a wish among the Member States to add a cultural dimension to the European integration process, in which education was to play an important part (Beukel, 1994). The Fontainebleau European Council of 1984 argued that it was important to promote the Community identity both for its citizens and in the rest of the world (European Council, 1984). Thus, besides the “*workers mobility*” goal of education, a second goal was being introduced and developed at European level: the “European dimension of Education”, as it was specified first by a Council Resolution of 1988 (Council of the European Communities, 1988) and, later on, by the *Green Paper on the European dimension of education* (CEC, 1993). The Green Paper argued that when deciding on the aims and means that should enable the Community to help in the development of quality education, the major goal of the completion of the Single Market had to be taken into account, as well as the social and technological changes of the post-industrial society.

The 1980s marked also the start of new initiatives and cooperation programmes. Among the factors that encouraged the Commission to establish its new programmes in the field of education and training, the most important was the 1985 *Gravier* judgment of the European Court of Justice (European Court of Justice, 1985) which held that vocational training included: ‘*any form of education which prepares for a qualification for a particular profession, trade or employment or which provides the necessary skills for such a profession, trade or employment ...*’ (European Commission, 2006 : 102). As a result of this ruling, the Commission and the Council implemented a new wave of projects and exchange programs for university students, teachers, pupils, young people and professionals¹ (Ertl, 2003; Keeling, 2006). Despite these new programmes, it is important to remark that at this time the Community still lacked a proper Treaty basis for such an expansion and also that the notion of a “European dimension in education” was too weak and vague to provide the growing number of initiatives with a convincing rationale. As also argued by Ertl, the impact of Community policies on national systems of education and training was limited “because of the modest and

¹In the area of education, the programmes included COMETT education and training for technology, ERASMUS for the mobility of university students and Lingua for foreign language learning. In the area of VET, the programmes included PETRA (vocational training of young people and their preparation for adult and working life), EUROTECNET (European technology network for training), IRIS (training programmes for women) and the Study Visit Programme for specialists of vocational education and training.

fragmented nature of Community projects, and also because the unclear legal foundations allowed the Member States to interpret and implement Community policies selectively” (Ertl, 2003 : 9).

Maastricht was an important milestone. Indeed, it was only with the Treaty of Maastricht that education was mentioned at the European level, though under the ‘subsidiarity’ principle. Specifically, article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty clearly stated the independence of national education policy by arguing that education and training systems and the content of learning programmes were the responsibility of the Member States. In addition, the article emphasized the idea of ‘quality’ of education by suggesting that “*the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States*”(art. 126). This co-operation had to be achieved by a wide range of actions, for instance by promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks, and exchanging information on Member States education systems. Moreover, this article introduced for the first time interest groups and other actors’ involvement in the education policy process at the European level by stipulating that the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions should be consulted by the Council on education matters. However, it would be hard to claim that Maastricht marked a new phase in EU education policy: the aims of the policy remained practically the same both in political and in economic terms and - throughout the 1990s - the Commission continued its emphasis on the ‘programme approach’ (Ertl, 2003 : 12), with mobility and exchanges programmes such as *Erasmus* for university students, *Comenius* for secondary school, *Leonardo da Vinci* for vocational education and training.

It is only during the 1990s that we can detect some important changes leading to a new phase of direction in the objectives of the Commission towards education, manifested through a number of initiatives, ideas and proposals, including Green Papers and White papers. Three of them are particularly notable. The first one is the White Paper “*Growth, Competitiveness, Employment - The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century*”, which was presented by Delors and his Commission in 1993. It is widely referred to as “the most significant EU policy document with regard to education and training” as it established *lifelong learning* as a guiding strategy in EU policies (Field, 2006 : 7; Keeling, 2006). The second was the White paper “*Teaching and learning: towards the learning society*” (CEC,1995), followed up by the communication “*Towards a Europe of Knowledge*” (CEC, 1997) that put a strong emphasis on the relationship between knowledge and employment. As stated in the foreword: “*Economic competitiveness, employment and personal fulfillment of the citizens of Europe is no longer mainly based on the production of physical goods, nor will it be in the future. Real wealth creation will henceforth be linked to the production and dissemination of knowledge and will depend first and foremost on our efforts in the field of research, education and training and on our capacity to promote innovation*” (CEC, 1997 :1). Besides the “Euro-rhetoric” contained in it, the communication reveals a clear change in the conceptualization of the *rationale* for education, with an emphasis on education as a source of “competitive advantage”. This marks the beginning of a new phase for the European Union’s involvement in the field, included higher education and VET.

Indeed, the Lisbon Summit of 2000 not only revived the agenda of enhancing economic growth and productivity in an EU context that had been earlier set out in the 1993 *White Paper*, but it took actions to implement it too, in placing education in the service of these

economic imperatives. The Lisbon strategy assigned education a key role in the new community strategy, establishing a new pace for the “unionization” of policies in education and training (Novoa and deJong-Lambert, 2003). For education, the Lisbon Conclusions defined a number of targets, including increasing investment, halving the number of young people with only lower secondary education, defining basic skills for the lifelong learning agenda, creating more transparency in the recognition of qualifications and periods of study and training, and developing a common format for *curriculum vitae* (European Council, 2000). The ambitious plan of the Lisbon strategy was to be pursued by intergovernmental activities, agreements and the setting of new mechanisms. The most important of these was the “Open Method of Coordination” as a means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals through the establishment of quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks, tailored to the “needs” of Member States and areas of education involved (European Council, 2000: 12).

For higher education, the so-called *Bologna process* (Bologna declaration, 1999) aimed at the creation of a “European higher education area.” The process, that involved also several organizations at European level (employers, academic trade unions, representatives of students, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions), promoted the introduction of a three cycle degree structure and organized national higher education qualifications into an overarching European-wide framework (Bologna working group, 2005). For vocational education and training, 31 countries signed the Copenhagen Declaration in 2002 (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training and European Commission, 2002). The *Copenhagen process* called for more mobility and cooperation, the creation of a single framework to facilitate mobility in the labour market and between education systems, and pushed forward ideas for increasing ‘transparency’ of qualifications including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and ‘common criteria and principles for quality in vocational education and training’. Around the same period of the Copenhagen declaration, the EU educational activities gained in prominence when national Ministers responsible for education endorsed the first European-level “*Work programme for education and training 2010*”, a ten year plan for modernizing education systems in EU Member States with three main goals: improving quality and effectiveness; facilitating access; and opening up national education and training systems to the world (Education Council, 2001).

Thus, the 2000s represent not only a new wave of policy activism of the Commission, but they also reveal a shift in the policy goals of education, in which the dimension of education as an identity creating tool was neglected in favour of a focus on the economic value of education (Walkenhortst, 2008). For the Commission, economic growth had to be determined by “*productivity growth, which itself depends on various factors like investment in capital and in ICT [information and communications technology], technological progress, organizational modernization, and **education***” (European Commission 2004: 24 – *emphasis added*).

This shift has been confirmed by the follow up of the Lisbon strategy in 2010, the *Europe 2020* strategy, which is the economic and employment plan for the European Union for the next decade and that emphasizes innovation and human capital as means to achieve “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” (European Commission, 2010). The governance structure of the Strategy is based on an architecture of two pillars: a “thematic approach” (that combines targets with priorities and initiatives carried out both at the EU and Member State level), and a “country reporting” pillar, which is a feedback mechanism between the Member

States and the EU, basically adapted from the primary governance mechanism of the Lisbon agenda, the OMC. The two main flagship initiatives for education within this Strategy – *Youth on the Move* and *An agenda for new skills and jobs* - stress that, in order to preserve European competitiveness and meet the demands of Europe’s future labour market, it is essential to “enhance the performance of education systems”, helping young people to “succeed in the knowledge economy”.

In sum, this description of the evolution of EU policies for education demonstrates how, until the end of the 1990’s, EU education policy functioned as instrumental to implement the four freedoms and the subsequent Single Market project while also having a political dimension to promote European identity. After the 1990’s, a strong emphasis was placed on the use of education as an instrument of employment and global economic competitiveness. In particular, with Lisbon and the *Europe 2020* strategy of 2010 education is now emphasized as the vital input for European economic growth. For the purposes of this paper, the challenge is now to understand which or whether any of the two theories of EU integration could be more fit to explain this evolution.

3. Explaining changes through theories of European Integration

Though they might appear obsolete and *old-fashioned*, supranationalism and intergovernmentalism are still the two main theoretical perspectives that have attempted to explain the process of European Integration, both dealing with the extent to which Member States delegate competences to the EU level in a certain policy field. My intention in this section is not to provide an overview of the history and developments in the thinking of the supranational-intergovernmental dichotomy, but rather to focus on the salient attributes of both by considering to what extent they may provide insights and understanding of the European education policy developments examined in the previous section.

Supranational explanations

Supranational explanations draw from the neo-functionalist approaches that were prevalent in the early days of the Community (Haas, 1958) and that were revived in the 1990s (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz, 1998). Though this approach belongs to the old school of thought in EU studies, it still retains substantial resonance for EU scholars today remaining ‘most insightful and helpful in understanding its (European integrations’s) underlying dynamics’ (Schmitter, 2006 : 265; Rosamond, 2003). The main proposition is that supranational institutions are not mere passive agents of Member States but instead have their own interests, preferences, resources and power (Hix and Hoyland, 2011). In particular, technocratic elites, business interest groups and other supranational lobbies are emphasized as the main agents of change; as claimed by Haas, these “political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities to a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing national states. The end result is a new political community, superimposed over the existing ones” (Haas, 1958: 16). Neo-functionalism predicts incremental and path-dependent pathways to integration, led by technocratic imperatives (Stroby-Jensen, 2003 : 88). A core element of supranational approaches is the concept of ‘spillover’ that accounts for a trend towards increasing integration, holding that integration in one field (eg. the mobility of

labour) inevitably leads to pressure for integration in others (eg. common immigration and asylum policies, moves towards European citizenship). Therefore, according to this approach we would expect that there would be pressures from spillovers and EU institutions themselves would create an EU education common policy, regardless explicit domestic preferences in the field.

The most comprehensive studies that see the advent of an EU education supranational policy are those by Field (1997), Ruberti (2001), Trondal (2002); Hingel (2001). Recently, Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg have examined how the soft policy coordination of the Open Method of Education has helped to achieve - in a time frame of ten years - a higher degree of cooperation in education matters with respect to what was achieved in the previous forty years. In their analysis, the creation of the link between education and employment made in the Lisbon strategy allowed the Commission to gain policy capacity without a formal delegation by Member States (Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg, 2011 : 1009). As argued by the so-called Europeanization literature (see Graziano and Wink 2007 for an overview) , the EU has also had an important impact on the domestic level by influencing the preferences and identity formation of Member States. Moreover, supranational institutions can strategically exploit the different domestic interests to push forward their own agenda. This is what Pollack calls the “creeping competence”, meaning that the Commission’s initial competences creep into other policy areas without formal authorization (Pollack, 1995). An example in this sense would be the highly intergovernmental Bologna process in which the Commission, originally excluded, managed to acquire a substantial and institutionalized role (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2013).

A theoretical concept derived from the supranationalist school of thought is that of “cultivated spillover” (Nye, 1970 : 804). *Cultivated spillover* defines the role undertaken by supranational institutions by providing additional initiatives to increase the areas of integration, despite the reluctance of Member State. The concept makes explicit reference to the contexts in which supranational institutions – i.e. the Commission – act not only as “mediators, but also more directly as agents of political integration or as ‘**policy entrepreneurs**’ (Stroby Jensen, 2009 : 85, *original emphasis*). Following this approach, the Commission is described as having an important margin of autonomy and capacity to influence the decision-making process (Laffan 1997). Numerous scholars have used this concept to explain policy change in several areas EU policy – such as education, social policy, environmental policy, and telecommunications – and their results support the idea of the Commission as a policy entrepreneur (Hooghe and Keating 1994; Keeling 2006; Corbett, 2003) or, in Cram’s words, as a “purposeful opportunist” (Cram, 1994). Ruth Keeling and Anne Corbett both agree on the “policy entrepreneurship” of the Commission; while Keeling argues that the Commission has been a successful actor in shaping the education discourse Europe-wide (Keeling, 2006), Corbett deeply investigates the role of the Commission as policy entrepreneur in the evolution of higher education policy, showing a political process shaped by unexpected events and lead by the policy entrepreneur of some Commission officials (Corbett, 2003).

However, even though the concept of spillover and the policy entrepreneurship of the European Commission might be useful to shed light on some developments of EU policy and while it is true that European education has experienced a qualitative and quantitative expansion after Lisbon, it would be hard to affirm that the undisputed need for cooperation has been translated in supranational integration, as predicted by supranationalism. Moreover, even though the creation of an *ad hoc* directorate (DG education and culture) can also be accounted as evidence of ‘spillover’, the introduction of education into the Maastricht Treaty did not advance the drive towards supranational integration, with education limited to areas of direct relevance to the Single Market

(for example, the mutual recognition of diplomas and training certificates). In addition, and as seen in the previous section, the Lisbon process and the new policymaking formula of the OMC redirects educational policy formulation back to the national ministries and thus further limits the influence of the Commission. Therefore, the concept of “spillovers” shows clearly its limitations because it cannot explain why more integration in Education at European level has not occurred. As pointed out by Moravcsik, “neo-functionalism appears to mispredict both the trajectory and the process of EC evolution” (Moravcsik, 1993 : 476).

Intergovernmentalist explanations

The second approach that has attempted to provide an explanation to the changes in EU education policy is intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1993; 1998). In this approach, Member States are the main units of action. States form their preferences through their own internal political processes, bargain with each other to reach the optimal policy solution, and – where it is in their interests to have a durable inter-governmental arrangement – delegate to supranational institutions the administration and enforcement of the mutually agreed solution. The nature of the solution depends principally on the strength of preferences for a particular outcome between the various states and their comparative bargaining power. According to this interpretation, EU development is the result of an interplay between the interests and preferences of Member States and supranational institutions are no more “agents of the EU government than powerful independent actors” (Hix and Hoyland, 2011 : 16). What intergovernmentalism denies is not just the *agency* of EU institutions, but the possibility itself that the EU may concretely and deliberately affect policy making. Put simply, if Member States do not agree on a common EU education policy, they will not get one.

This approach may be useful to illuminate some turning points in the evolution of the policy in which Member States represented both a negative and positive impetus. For instance, though Maastricht gave the EU certain competences in education, the principle of subsidiarity made these competences quite limited. On the other hand, certain positive initiatives have resulted from intergovernmental agreements, for instance the *Sorbonne Declaration of 1998*, which gave rise to the *Bologna* process for higher education. In this sense, Bologna would represent a good case in supporting the intergovernmentalist interpretation of governments using supranational institutions and programmes to pursue favored national goals which might be politically difficult to promote on a purely domestic basis (Nagel, 2009). For instance, Sorbonne was used by the original participating governments to ‘kick-start domestic reform agendas’ in higher education (Knodel and Walkenhorst, 2010 : 138). Finally, it seems likely that the *Lisbon* process of the OMC is helpful to some governments in achieving education reforms which they might balk at on a purely domestic basis, where instead they can strategically take advantage of the EU Commission with its operational infrastructure and resources of information, experience and research capacities (Nugent, 2010).

However, it would be insufficient to assume that Member States intended to increase cooperation in education and that the rise of the EU policy agenda was the consequence. This assumption implies a specific question: under which conditions would be an intergovernmental framework applicable? The answer should be related to the specific nature of education as policy field, which is characterized by “ambiguity” and “high issue complexity” (Zahariadis, 2008) . While *ambiguity* refers to a process “where there is a shifting roster of participants, opaque technologies and individuals with unclear preferences” (Ackrill

et al. 2013 : 871), *high issue complexity* indicates the degree of interaction (horizontal and vertical) among different policy actors that makes the direction of policy change more unpredictable (Zahariadis, 2008). These instances are hardly recognized by intergovernmentalism. As also pointed out by scholars, the intergovernmentalism approach based on “rational actor model” (Cini, 2003 : 103) “wins easily” only on specific fields of EU politics, namely when it is applied to cases in which economic integration is the main concern and where decisions are taken on the basis of unanimous voting by Member States in the Council (Wincott, 1995; Scharpf, 1999). This suggests that, though the theory might be useful explaining the more dramatic developments of the EU agenda, it would not seem to be a powerful explanation of many of the incremental developments observed; for instance, the elaboration of the different education programmes or the evolution of the common instruments to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe (e.g. some “translation” devices such as the European Qualification Framework).

In this respect, a legitimate question would be why education became a high salience issue for Member States, despite their diversity of education systems and the plethora of strong interest groups in the field (for example trade unions, notoriously representing a strong veto power in most of Member States against educational reforms). A plausible answer would be that changes in global and European political economies, the rise of young unemployment, sectoral changes and the shift from an industrial to a post-Fordist knowledge economy, can all be accounted as the reasons why education policy is now conceived as a “supplementary market and workforce creation tool” (Walkenhorst, 2008; Ertl, 2003). The evolution of EU policies provided in the previous section would confirm that the economic rationale for broader and deeper EU integration has been a significant factor for convergence of interests in education. However, this does not clarify *what* has primed Member States to see the *problem* of education in terms that made - for instance - benchmark and indicators as the *solution*.

To sum up, though the *policy entrepreneurship* of the Commission and the strategic delegations of Member States at the EU level can be a useful lens for aiding our understanding of why some of the stages of the development of EU policies occurred, both explanations seem insufficient as they struggle to account for the dynamics and mechanisms driving the connection between education and European competitiveness. Thus, in order to “marry” the two approaches and move towards a deeper explanation, to better capture the *input side* of the policy formation of education and to explain why the education agenda chose to privilege a link with economy, it is necessary to expand the analytical framework taking into account the role of ideas in policy making.

4. Moving beyond the supranational-intergovernmental dichotomy: the role of ideas

Scholars that have sought to explain policy change through the role of ideas, have been confronted with the skepticism of objectivist approaches such as those of rational choice scholars who contend that institutions, power relations and interests are the prevalent causal factors for explaining policy change. However, as recently argued by the economist Dani Rodrik, taking into account the role of ideas in shaping interests, “could provide a more convincing account of both stasis and change in political-economic life” (Rodrik, 2014 : 190). Providing an overview of the theoretical and empirical literature on ideas in policy making,

would go beyond the scope of this paper (well documented works are those of Blyth, 2002; Béland, 2009; Beland and Cox, 2010; Gofas and Hay, 2010). Here, I will narrow the focus by briefly examining the concepts of *frames* and of Peter Hall's *policy paradigm* (Hall, 1989; 1993) in order to provide some preliminary thoughts on how these lens of analysis might be useful to better understand the evolution of EU education policy.

In ideational perspectives, actors within policymaking processes often work within a framework of ideas and roadmaps that act as explanatory variables to define their preferences "by stipulating causal patterns or by providing compelling ethical or moral motivations for actions" (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993 : 16) and by constraining the cognitive range of useful solutions available to policy makers (Campbell, 2002). Following this conceptualization, ideas can be considered as *frames* which "define, in a given field, world views, mechanisms of identity formation, principles of actions, as well as methodological prescriptions and practices for actors subscribing to the same frame" (Surel, 2000 : 496). Put it simply, a frame is a perspective that identifies problems, suggests explanations and proposes certain public policy actions that could solve these problems. The seminal work of Peter Hall "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State", that examines the changes in economic policy making in the United Kingdom from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism during the Thatcherian period (Hall, 1993), still provides a standard reference for policy frame theorists. To Hall, ideas are very important in policymaking; once accepted, they provide a space and a structure for political action, influencing the way in which actors interpret policy problems, as well as impacting on the objectives and instruments of policy that are deemed appropriate (Hall, 1993 : 279). Ideas constitute the interpretive framework – what he calls the *policy paradigm*, drawing from Kuhnian's notion of scientific paradigms (Kuhn, 1970) - within which government officials and politicians understand and communicate about their work.

In Hall's interpretations, a policy paradigm can be of first, second and third order change (Hall, 1993 : 278). More specifically, a *first order* change concerns adjustments to instrument settings, a *second order* change involves the alteration of both the settings and the policy instruments and, finally, a *third order* change – the paradigm shift in Kuhnian's sense – occurs when the two aforementioned variables blend with a radical change of the policy goals. While first and second order changes are marginal and routinely changes, mainly consequence of technical learning by civil servant and specialists, a third order change is a general *paradigm shift* which is set off by exogenous shocks and policy failures and is heavily influenced by new ideas and societal learning (Hall, 1993). In other words, the adoption of a specific policy paradigm affects the *problems* that the policy makers should address, the *goals* to be pursued and the *instruments* to be used. Thus, once a paradigm shift is established, it becomes the "magical weapon of wizards" (Hall, 1989 : 367), influencing how actors perceive the world and the discourse they use.

Building on these premises, how can we make sense of the changes in EU education policy ? Could the adoption of a framing perspective better elucidate the nature and the dynamics of these transformations? Following Hall's conceptualization, I contend that there are some aspects of these developments that may suggest how the framing of the reform process around education has brought to a *paradigm shift* intended as the institutionalization of new principles and beliefs among the principal actors. Indeed, going back to the evolution of EU education policy provided in the previous section, we have seen how *certain ideas* have

emerged. More specifically, the idea of *European competitiveness* to be achieved through reforming education and training, has been a clear *leitmotiv* of the EU's political agenda, especially after the *Lisbon* and *Europe 2020* Strategies. In the discourse pushed forward by the Commission, the "modernization" of education and training systems has become an appealing catchword to indicate that national systems in Member States are substantially outdated and in need of reform. By borrowing the framing perspective, it could thus be noticed how a *specific problem* (i.e. outdated training systems in Europe and lack of EU's competitiveness) has been linked with a *particular solution* (i.e. modernizing them according to the policy objectives formulated by the EU).

In addition, a new educational space has been shaped as well (Allmendinger et al. 2010). Within this space, new actors from the private sector have entered the domain, the use of indicators, benchmarks and externally verifiable texts has become a key feature to measure educational achievements, and addressing Europe's skills gap is now perceived as a crucial element of educational reforms. Most importantly, the "framing" of education and training as crucial factor to determine growth and prosperity in Europe, has been and is being pushed forward by both an intergovernmental (Bologna) and a supranational (Copenhagen) process. Indeed, though Member States may or may not agree on the "intrusion" of the EU level on education issue, it must be nevertheless noticed the absence of *any* contestation at Member State level on the role of education as a tool of competitiveness and employability of workers.

Core features of this paradigm are represented not only by the changes in the new ideas about the European role in education and, more in general, by the strategic role that education plays in the global world, but also by the changes in the goals of policy, principles and policy instruments (as for example the OMC and the use of benchmarks and indicators to assess the "performance" of Member States in achieving the EU targets). In addition to reshaping the goals around education policy, the paradigm has changed the *constellation of actors* in the European education arena. For instance, within the framework of the *Lisbon* agenda and the policy processes of *Bologna* and *Copenhagen*, several European networks of civil servants and experts working in the field of education have been set up with the goal of exchanging information and of promoting cooperation at Member States level holding content-related discussions on the EU agenda. As also argued by Lawn, " a range of particular governing devices, as networking, seminars, reviews, expert groups" is now embedded in a "new space for education (Lawn, 2006 : 272; 2002 : 20). Thus, this view of the paradigm as a *cooperation-device* would confirm Hall's argument of its very cohesive function in policy-making, which mitigates or unifies the otherwise dispersed interests in a given policy sector and allows coalition building and collaboration between different groups of actors, changing the perceptions actors have of their interests (Hall, 1989).

Yet, "taking ideas seriously" (Rodrik, 2014 : 205) may open a Pandora's vase; indeed, ideas are ubiquitous, unstable and rarely consistent. Which ideas mattered in the EU's involvement in education and how did they become institutionalized, shaping actors' behavior, motivation and context? How could we recognize and empirically catch their influence? Some of the shifts experienced by the EU education policy – for instance the employment of evaluation mechanisms, orientation towards outcomes and efficiency, the focus on benchmarks and performance indicators – are clearly inspired by the approaches of the New Public management, developed worldwide also with the contribution of international organizations; in particular the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Verger et al. ,

2012). However, at the EU education policy-making level, the topic has not been formally investigated yet and drilling down to the causal mechanisms, explaining exactly how these ideas determined and maintained the policy preferences of EU actors is an empirical issue that further research should address. As an example of questions related to such mechanisms, one might ask, how have the global trends of market dominance in education reflecting neo liberal values and aspirations been mediated in the European context, as well as acknowledged by EU policy-makers? For instance, as argued by Borras with reference to the Lisbon Strategy, “we still know very little politically about how the strategy was designed before 2000 and what dynamics were behind its remake in 2005” (Borras, 2009). Also, following Hall’s argument that paradigmatic change is mostly the result of a crisis or anomaly, it would be relevant to explore the policy formation of the “Europe 2020” strategy, developed within the framework of the disappointing results of the Lisbon agenda (Sapir, 2003; Kok, 2004) and in the context of the general economic and political crisis in the late 2000s: the “vision” of this strategy, in which a neo-liberal competitiveness agenda dominates (Hyman, 2011) offers a set of conditions that suggest that ideational factors might have had causal salience in determining policy preferences of EU actors .

Thus, I will now conclude by suggesting a preliminary research strategy to elucidate how ideas can help explaining the evolution of EU education policy. Using historical documentary analysis, expert interviews, and process tracing, specific policy ideas in education should first be identified. The analysis of such policy ideas should clarify which problems were constructed and by which actors –the *ideas carriers* and *entrepreneurs* - were advocated. A closer look at the *problem definition* should reveal which beliefs and assumptions actors used to construct an issue in that particular way. It should then be possible to ascertain the basic policy paradigm from these underlying assumptions. A methodological challenge to detect which frames influenced the policy result would be to reconstruct the historical sequence, breaking down “big events into causally connected sequences of events and examining each link in the chain” (Tilly, 1995 : 1602). In this sense, employing process tracing as method seems to be well suited to detect scope, conditions and causal mechanisms, allowing to see which actors, interests, institutions, and ideas were important in producing a paradigm or a policy outcome (Yee, 1996; Berman, 2001).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the evolution and dynamics of European education policy against the backdrop of the supranational and intergovernmental EU approaches and it has confronted them with an explanation that looks more closely at ideational factors. Firstly, I have provided an historical account of the evolution of EU education policy. The purpose of this account has been twofold. In terms of policy, I have illuminated the EU’s increasing role in education policy despite its lack of formal competence. In terms of content, I have underlined the shift from a concept of education linked to European identity and workers’ mobility to a concept in which education is essential for productivity and European competitiveness. Secondly, the critical discussion of EU integration theories has showed that, even though supranationalism and intergovernmentalism can be relevant approaches in explaining some of the stages of the development of EU policies, they both reveal some pitfalls. On the one hand, supranational explanations cannot explain why more integration did not occur or, in other words, why we have not seen the emergence of a genuine European education policy. On the other, intergovernmentalist approaches, in which rationality and preferences represent the *deus ex machina* of policy change, also are not fully convincing as they should explain how different actors (and different interests) came to take similar approaches in

articulating a link between the economic problems of the EU and education as a potential solution. Moreover, both theories seem less suitable when applied to more complex and ambiguous policy processes and fields as in the case of education. The discussion of the two theories has indicated that relying exclusively on supranationalist and intergovernmentalist approaches does not preclude the possibility that other factors played a role in the explanatory account. Here, I agree with Walkenhorst who argues that, “with regard to interests, actors, structures, contingency, veto players and power relations that might have contributed to shape EU education policy, there is much to explore and explain in this policy realm” (Walkenhorst, 2008 : 582). However, in departing from this claim, I have contended that, in order to understand the full picture of EU education policy and to overcome some blind spots of the mainstream EU theories accounts, a constructivist-ideational approach has to be taken into consideration. This does not necessarily imply to see ideas as opposite or separate to interests. In particular, I share the view of Steinmo that “ideas are not irrational, but instead are best understood as creative adaptations that can be evaluated both on rational and emotive grounds” (Steinmo, 2010 : 131).

Ultimately, I have not denied that changes in education are the outcome of actors’ strategic interests (being them the Commission or Member States), but, instead, I have suggested to enrich and complement current explanations by capturing the process through which ideational factors and norms have shaped and constructed these interests. Specifically, the adoption of Hall’s conceptualization of paradigm shift may provide a useful contribution to the understanding of policy dynamics in the EU education policy, thus enriching theories of EU integration in recognizing the importance of ideational factors. The research could go further by conducting a more rigorous empirical research strategy that should identify the modes through which ideas have impacted in the policy making process. To conclude, by considering ideas as explanatory variables, European education policy may emerge not only because of Member States agreements or Commission *entrepreneurship* but also because of the widespread of ideas about the economic role of education in Europe.

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