# Time in Education Policy Transfer

## The Seven Temporalities of Global School Reform

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I would be amiss if I did not mention my second home base in Switzerland. There/here, the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies and the NORRAG Global Education Centre enabled me to stay connected with scholars and practitioners in policy and planning worldwide. NORRAG's long-standing commitment to combating knowledge inequity by amplifying and disseminating research from the Global South has been constantly on my mind when I searched for sources and examples. Finally, throughout the past year, my partner Ina Boesch, but also Aris, Gil, and Franco, reminded me that it is essential to make time for matters of the heart.

New York and Zurich, February 2025                    Gita Steiner-Khamsi

# Contents

# About the Author

**Gita Steiner-Khamsi** is the William H. Kilpatrick Professor of Comparative Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. She also holds an honorary appointment as UNESCO Chair of Comparative Education Policy at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. She is a past president of the Comparative and International Education Society, former editor of the *World Yearbook of Education*, served five years as the academic director of NORRAG, and currently serves as a lead co-editor for the section Qualitative Comparative Policy Studies of the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*. Before her academic career, she worked for nearly ten years at the Ministry of Education of the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland, where she established and directed the first department in charge of multicultural education policies. She published fourteen books and numerous journal articles on policy borrowing, comparative policy studies, and global governance in education. Her work has been published in several languages, including Mongolian.

# List of Figures

# LIST OF TABLES

xv

# The Study of Policy Transfer
# in Education

This book explores a less-studied aspect of policy transfer: time.

A terrain of the comparative social sciences, policy transfer deals with the study of reforms that spread globally and are subsequently selectively adopted and translated locally. Researchers examine the trajectories of these reforms, investigating which reforms become global, why and when policymakers adopt them, how they are adapted to local contexts, and whether they change over time in response to feedback. This book uses the most recent global school reform, known as the School-Autonomy-with-Accountability (SAWA) reform, as a case study to illustrate the process and outcomes of policy transfer.

Qualitative comparative policy analysis, propelled in this book, is nested in contextual comparison (Steiner-Khamsi & Morais de Sá e Silva, 2024). For this reason, the policy transfer of SAWA is first discussed in its own contexts (Part I) before dissecting the temporal dimension of transfer more systematically (Part II) and placing it in a larger conceptual framework (Part III).

Part I introduces key aspects of policy transfer research, presents the SAWA case, and applies the research topic to the case using a wide range of country contexts. Throughout the book, I differentiate between the macro-level—exploring the evolution and diffusion of a global script such as SAWA—and the institutional or meso-level: examining why and when policymakers adopt the reform and how they adapt its elements to their local context. This differentiation is also manifest in this part of the book,

with Chap. 1 providing a macroscopic perspective on the global spread of the reform and Chap. 2 focusing on how different education systems have selectively adopted and translated the global script.

## REFERENCE

Steiner-Khamsi, G., & Morais de Sá e Silva, M. (2024). Qualitative comparative policy studies: An introduction from the special section editors. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, 26*(5), 541–555. https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2024.2383061

# Traveling Reforms from a Comparative, Transnational, and Global Perspective

This book is about reforms that travel across countries. It introduces the reader to the well-established scholarship referred to interchangeably as policy transfer, policy diffusion, policy borrowing, policy circulation, or policy mobility research. By default, this line of research has traditionally been both comparative and transnational. After all, one must be familiar with two or more educational systems to notice that the same reforms surface in different parts of the world. Examples include in the 1980s the spread of equal opportunity policies, in the 1990s school choice policies, in the 2000s accountability policies, in the 2010s environmental education policies, and in the 2020s social-emotional learning and student well-being policies, only to name a few. However, the transnational feature of this strand of research was very much confined to the study of transatlantic policy borrowing or policy circulation within the Anglophone world. This book attempts to overcome this bias and fill in the blank spots on the world map. I will do so by investigating policy circulation worldwide, that is, in a wide range of countries, including in countries of the Global South. Once we apply the triple orientation—comparative, transnational, global—different types of transfer emerge, ranging from voluntary transfer (lesson-drawing, emulation) to coercive transfer imposition, programmatic conditionalities), and in between (harmonization).

Comparative education has been mesmerized by this topic since its inception as an academic field. What has changed over time is the object of policy attraction. Previously, the main interest was to observe, learn,

and selectively borrow from successful reforms in other countries. Kelly (1992, p. 14), for example, refers to the early days of comparative education as the time "when gentlemen traveled extensively and wrote about differences between nations." The "traveling observer" (Sobe, 2002, p. 147) was a popular trope in historical accounts of comparative education.

Policy pilgrimage occurs in all public sectors. Henig et al. (1988, p. 458) counted delegations from more than twenty countries that individually visited Britain in the 1980s to learn about privatization. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Asian Development Bank encouraged study visits for government officials to see for themselves how results-based management functions in New Zealand (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Dispatching government officials for a policy pilgrimage provokes negative associations with reward travel and is now considered outdated. Nevertheless, policy pilgrimage to Finland and other league leaders in international large-scale student assessments, such as PISA and TIMSS, is thriving to the extent that the study visits have turned into a lucrative business.[1]

Nowadays, policy transfer occurs in myriad ways, such as the circulation of data, downloading and uploading policies, or turning to global platforms, networks, and initiatives to inspire and justify controversial policy decisions. The adoption of "best practices" or the alignment of national educational systems with "international standards" broadly defined could be viewed as transnational policy transfer and thus add credence to what Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) described more than twenty years ago in a much-cited article: "When we are analyzing policy change, we always need to ask the question: is policy transfer involved?" (p. 14).

For both objects of policy attraction mentioned above, lesson drawings from another country or from digital platforms administered by international organizations, there is an enormous rift that yawns between those implementing and those studying educational borrowing. The differentiation between normative versus analytical interests in policy transfer is important. The first group is interested in discovering what works and what could or should be transferred. In contrast, the second group has made it its intellectual project to understand why and when reforms from

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[1] VisitEduFinn Ltd. exports, in collaboration with the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Finnish model of schooling. The fee structure for a school visit (EUR 190), teacher job shadowing (EUR 190) or meeting with a Finnish education expert (EUR 199) and many other offerings is posted online: https://visitedufinn.com/about-us/

elsewhere resonate, how they are selectively borrowed, and then locally adapted and recontextualized in the "transfer space" (Porto de Oliveira & Osorio Gonnet, 2023, p. 369). What we hope to gain from the analytical preoccupation with policy transfer pursued in this book is ultimately a more thorough understanding of the policy process and policy outcomes.

The transnational feature of our approach should not be taken for granted in an area of research that investigates the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. Policy studies are prone to fall into the trap of "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003) because of their predisposition to focus on governments, policy actors, and decision-makers. The methodological lopsidedness also applies to studies that reflect the international dimension yet see the global as outside the national or conceive the global as "hierarchical, linear and hegemonic" (Grek, 2020, p. 175). I do not consider governments to be helpless victims vis-à-vis global actors. There needs to be a buy-in at the national level for the global to stick and to have an impact.

In fact, as comparative policy researchers, we are not prepared to dismiss the notions of "national" and "global" because the nexus between the two levels of governance explains, to some extent, the policy decisions of governments. The two levels need to be seen as interdependent spaces rather than distinct places. For this reason, I do not view the "global" as "external" to national policymaking. Just to the contrary, I found that policy actors at specific moments of protracted policy constellations tend to instrumentally mobilize global actors *as if* they were external political forces (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Our focus on the relational aspect between the global and national levels of government is very much in line with Stone's (2020, p. 7) call to commit to "methodological transnationalism unabashedly." Such a methodological approach is genuine in comparative policy analysis, which "is the DNA of policy transfer studies" (Porto de Oliveira & Osorio Gonnet, 2023, p. 368).

As a corollary, we direct our attention to the global and the national levels and the nexus between the two levels and ask the following: (1) What exactly travels across national education systems? (2) Why do national education systems buy into global reform packages, and how do they translate them to fit their context? (3) What has changed at the global and national levels in response to the varied national encounters with global reform packages?

## 1    CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN EDUCATION

Let us not forget that education for the masses is, at best, 100–150 years old. In countries of the Global South, it was introduced with a time lag of several decades simply because the colonial empires denied them their right to education. Furthermore, some countries continue, or have relapsed, to exclude disenfranchised groups from schools (girls, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, refugee groups, etc.) or assign them to lower-quality non-formal education programs. The discovery of the child as a human species that, regardless of social background, deserves special care and attention helped suspend the earlier focus on "single rank categories" (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2006, p. 162; see also Vanderstraeten, 2006) such as the education of princes, noblemen, knights, and future sovereigns, taught by private tutors, or first-born sons, taught by priests. At the same time, modern schooling displaced earlier educative sites, notably the family, the community, and the church. In a continuous process of professionalization and specialization of education, schools came to be seen as the only organizational form where literacy, numeracy, and other relevant skills for living in modern society were supposed to be taught, thereby disempowering all other educative sites, which were downgraded and framed as non-formal and unprofessional education.

### 1.1    The Grammar of Schooling and Its Cyclical Contestations

Given the short lifespan of education for the masses, it is remarkable then that schools operate similarly regardless of their location. At least at the surface, schools in different parts of the world have converged to the same model of schooling. We are all familiar with the key features of the traditional model school, labeled "modern schooling" (Caruso, 2022), "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), or the "world culture of schooling" (Baker & LeTendre, 2005): age-homogenous classes, classification of students, tracking along ability groups, one adult or one teacher per classroom. Of course, multi-grade teaching, inclusive education, and other practices challenge the model. What is taken for granted in the covert grammatical rules of "good schooling" is neither practical nor just but remains pervasive and resistant to change.

In addition to the longer trajectory of the grammar of schooling, recurrent themes or challenges resurface in shorter reform cycles. How can we deal with heterogeneity, support self-motivated learning, or cope with the

wicked problem of preparing students for a future that only exists as a projection of the present? These are some of the recurrent themes in education. Drawing on their historical account of education technology, Tyack and Cuban (1995) popularized the concept of reform cycles. They showed how reform enthusiasm withers after a while or, as with education technology, is shut down and re-surfaces either in a modified form or under a different label (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). They demonstrate how substandard quality, unfair competition, and other "irregularities" have plagued education technology dating back to its early days in the 1960s. Contrary to what one would expect from today's highly technologized classrooms, its entry into the education sector was not smooth. In the United States, the disenchantment with the education technology industry and its periodical scandals grew to the extent that businesses were locked out of schools for several decades (see Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The innovation occurred in several rounds or reform cycles. After each setback, the education technology conglomerate hastened to create a flurry of new arguments about why computers are indispensable for effective teaching and, over time, why it is essential for deep learning. Despite monumental setbacks, education technology (EdTech) has persisted in re-entering schools with continuously changing selling points which have matched and, in fact, amplified the pedagogical beliefs and the larger policy goals held at different times: in the 1970s and 1980s, instructional technology's benefits were framed in terms of equal opportunity and, in the 1990s, in terms of quality improvement. In the 1970s, during the wave of equal opportunity policies, the strong points of instructional technology were individualized learning, programmed instruction, and compensatory education for slow learners who, for various reasons, needed to learn at their own pace rather than following group instruction. Later, the benefits were extended to fast learners or gifted education. However, with the turn to foundational learning and quality improvement in the new millennium, EdTech re-invented itself as the indispensable ingredient for better, deeper learning. In its most recent reincarnation, education technology had presented itself as the friend in need when schools had to be closed and massive learning loss transpired due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With every iteration, the revolving door enabled the education technology industry to rejuvenate and distance itself from a past that was not as glorious as commonly assumed. Instructional technology is an excellent example of the shape-shifting feature of innovations that recur in reform cycles.

Perhaps needless to state here, any topic from the reservoir of grand expectations that modern schooling has raised lends itself to continuous debate and cyclical contestation. Its commitment to teaching "everyone everything by all possible means" is no small feat.[2] Everyone can verify whether that promise has been kept and, if necessary, insist that it should. While the cyclical comeback of instructional technology, documented by Tyack and Cuban (1995), dealt with the promise of exhausting "all possible means" of effective instruction, the other two grand narratives of modern schooling—teaching "everyone" and "everything"—are equally recurrent themes. Often, coalitions are built to remind the state of its promises. For example, the notion of "everyone" gradually expanded over the past fifty years to include social groups that were denied equal access to educational provisions because of their social class, gender, ethnicity or race, nationality, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and most recently, gender identity. As in previous times, when disenfranchised groups joined forces to make themselves heard, the LGBT movement of the millennium followed a "constructive logic" (see Velasco & Paxton, 2022) by incorporating like-minded, disenfranchised groups into their movement (LGBTQIA+) to amplify their political voice. Both coalition-building and backlash, such as the current attack against multiculturalism or, rather, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), manifest the political process that is involved in changing or reverting reform agendas.

### 1.2    The End of the Neoliberal Reform Wave

Contrary to the boomerang effect of EdTech that resurfaced from time to time in reform cycles, reform waves exist with a clear beginning and a clearly defined end. These reform waves carry with them fundamental reforms that eclipse or reframe all other changes that are going on at that moment. They are pervasive because they pursue (i) a political mission with a formulated reform goal, (ii) a theory of change that specifies how the change mechanism is set in motion, (iii) a congruent bundle of policies that cover all relevant areas of reform in the system, and (iv) a set of policy instruments that first trigger the change mechanism, then institutionalize

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[2] This is a loose reference to Jan Amos Comenius' (1592–1670) famously known Latin phrase *omnes, omnia, omnino* (Meyer, 2012). His universalist vision extended to the subjects *(omnes)*, the content *(omnia)*, and the methods of education *(omnino)*: All children *(omnes)* should go to school, learn about everything *(omnia)*, and do so thoroughly *(omnino)*.

the changes, and finally sustain the reform. Over the past fifty years, we experienced three reform waves in the education sector, each lasting approximately twenty-five years. With each generational shift, a new reform wave built up. Let's label them the equal-opportunity reform (1970s and 1980s), the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform (1990s and 2000s), and tentatively the student-well-being reform (2010s to present).

How can we tell that one reform wave has ended and a new one started? This is indeed a puzzle that deserves theorizing. Several scholars made attempts to provide an operational definition of fundamental change. For example, Tyack and Cuban (1995) differentiate between fundamental and incremental changes whereby the first type qualifies as a significant change in the reform goal, and the second type merely represents modifications to an ongoing reform. Along the same line of argumentation, they differentiate between policy talk and policy action. They contend that what gets talked about is different from what gets implemented. Even though there is no straightforward manner in how reforms impact change at the school level because, in actual reality, "schools change reforms" (Cuban, 1998), we need to take into account that political rhetoric and policy talk may be nevertheless consequential because financial resources, legislative changes, and new policy instruments are typically attached to political action programs.

I also find Ball's and Hall's work insightful for better conceptualizing reform waves. Ball (1998) proposes a differentiation between envisioned versus enacted policy and additionally acknowledges the transnational nature of policymaking, first presented in his essay "Big Policies/Small World" (Ball, 1998; see Lingard & Sellar, 2013). According to Ball, traveling policies, global education policies, or global "policyscapes" impact national policymaking in subtle ways by defining both what the problem is and what the policy solution are supposed to be. Worth examining then is what the varied vernacular policy responses had been to the policyscapes which circulated the globe (Ball, 1998; Ball & Junemann, 2012).

Hall, in turn, differentiates between three different kinds of change. What Tyack and Cuban (1995) define as a fundamental reform, Hall (1993) considers a third-order policy change. As Table 1.1 indicates, first-order changes represent incremental changes or minor modifications to previous reforms. In second-order changes, the instruments of regulation are replaced, but the policy goal remains intact. However, in third-order changes, the policy goal as well as the policy instruments are revamped. Hall examines third-order policy changes during the Thatcher–Reagan

**Table 1.1**  Types of policy changes

|  | *Policy goals* | *Policy instruments* |
|---|---|---|
| 1st-order change (incremental change) | Preserved | Preserved |
| 2nd-order change | Preserved | Changed |
| 3rd-order change (fundamental reform) | Changed | Changed |

era, which in the education sector resulted in an avalanche of new policies, such as the introduction of a national curriculum, school autonomy, school choice and standardized exams. It also redefined the role of the state in steering the reform as reflected in the change of policy instruments. Upon closer examination, it is clear that these policies were all part and parcel of a larger "globally structured educational agenda" spreading around the globe, better known as neoliberalism (Dale, 2000; Robertson & Dale, 2015).

Following the lead of Verger and his associates (Verger et al., 2019a; Robertson & Verger, 2012), I refer to the neoliberal reform wave as the "school-autonomy-with-accountability" (SAWA) reform. The particle "with" denotes the existence of two distinct packages that, if implemented jointly, are supposed to improve the quality of education. A few years earlier in 2011, the OECD elaborated how school autonomy relates to accountability (OECD, 2011a), and the World Bank published in the same year a background paper on the topic (World Bank, 2011). It is uncontested that SAWA was a global school reform with all the features of a fundamental reform (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) or third-order change (Hall, 1993), respectively. As I will elaborate in detail below, the reform had a script with a specific political goal, a detailed theory of change, a coherent bundle of policies, and a set of preferred policy instruments. Governments worldwide adopted and selectively implemented this script in the 1990s and 2000s.

The ebb and flow of reform tides has been empirically assessed for the first time in education policy research. Inconceivable as this may sound, such an ambitious enterprise has been made feasible by Bromley (Stanford University) and Kijima (University of Toronto) and their respective doctoral researchers (Bromley et al., 2021, 2023). They developed and made the World Education Reform Database (WERD[3]) publicly available, which

[3] The World Education Reform Database (WERD) is available here: https://werd.stanford.edu

features a collection of 10,955 policy documents from 189 countries and territories.[4] The documents, retrieved online from platforms administered by the OECD, UNESCO, World Bank, and other international organizations, span from 1970 to 2020. In selecting the relevant documents for the database, they used three sampling criteria or a tripartite definition of reform. Specifically, the proposed change had to be (i) systemic (broad impact rather than merely ad hoc funding for projects or school-level interventions), (ii) non-routine (adjustments to existing policies were excluded), and (iii) planned or purposeful (include a definition of goals and actions that are required to be taken).

Bromley et al. (2021) convincingly demonstrate an explosive growth in reforms worldwide during the neoliberal era, which they specify as the period of 1992–2008 worldwide, as measured in terms of the number of education reforms reported per year. On average, a country launched 1.65 reforms per year. In comparison, there were significantly fewer reforms in the liberal era (1960–1991) and the post-liberal era (2009–2017).

Figure 1.1 clearly shows three fascinating phenomena. First, there are two peaks related to the neoliberal era: one around 1989/1990 and
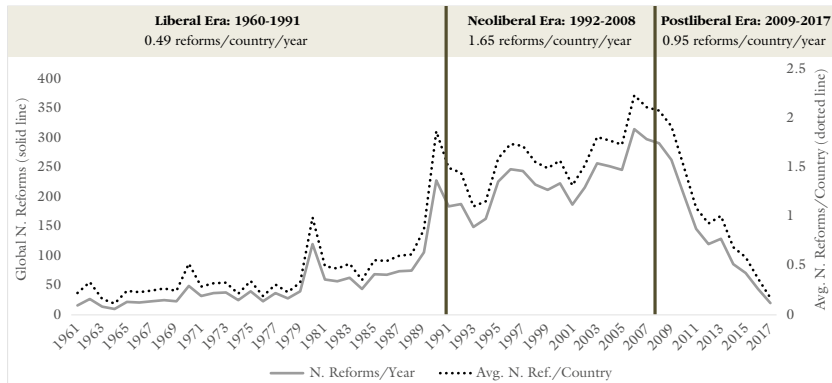


**Fig. 1.1** Number of reforms, 1961–2017 (*n* reforms = 6700; *n* countries = 147). (*Source*: Bromley et al. (2023, p. 158), reprinted with permission from Sage Publications)

[4] The research team, based at Stanford University and University of Toronto, continuously updates the database. The collection, mentioned here, relates to version 2 of WERD.

another around 2005/2006.[5] These two peaks confirm our findings, discussed in the next chapter: The first peak (1989) shows intense reform activity related to the new public management (NPM) reforms that soon after led to a series of reorganizations within state institutions and new procurement laws in all sectors, including in the education sector. The main goals of the first phase of the neoliberal reform wave were deregulation, privatization, and decentralization. The second peak (2006) is specific to the education sector. As I will show, it represents a translation or adaptation of the NPM reform to the education sector. It entailed an entire reform package, labeled here as school-autonomy-with-accountability (SAWA). I consider them as two phases of the same neoliberal reform because the new reform goal (quality improvement), associated with the new policy instrument (performance-based measurement), was introduced by the ministries of finance as part of NPM for the entire public sector and then translated by the line ministries a few years later in their sector. Both reform phases introduced controversial policies with vast negative repercussions. Dunleavy et al. (2005) show convincingly how the NPM reform wrecked the public administration in the pioneer country of NPM: New Zealand. By 1999, the country of 3.5 million people was left with over 300 separate central agencies and 49 tiny ministries. All these structural changes had vast budgetary implications and, therefore, necessitated legislative changes, as reflected in the policy documents compiled in the WERD research program. Applied to the education sector, the two most visible signposts of the first NPM-induced reform phase were the decentralization of decision-making authority from the central to the municipal level as well as the introduction of school-based management in some countries, also referred to as school autonomy. The second phase dealt specifically with education and saw numerous new policies that introduced a national or standardized curriculum framework, mandated standardized student assessments, and other measures. The role of OECD's PISA, first administered in 2000, should not be underestimated in promoting curriculum-related reform that occurred during the second phase of the neoliberal era.

Second, what comes across as a decline in neoliberal reform activity (2008) could also be interpreted, in my opinion, as a saturation effect. The

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[5] Thus, I suggest that we assume a slightly earlier start date for the neoliberal reforms because the New Public Management reform, which set them in motion, was in the early 1990s.

finding that reform activity, as measured in the number of legislative changes issued per year, dropped around 2007, may be a result of burn-out. By that time, most countries already selectively adopted first NPM policies and, a few years later, SAWA policies.

Finally, let us not forget that policy documents are indicative of change and not of continuity. Thus, the reforms of the first and third wave—some of them introducing sweeping changes—were not done by means of legislative changes but by means of other policy instruments. In sum, the neoliberal reform era, shown in Fig. 1.1, consisted of two reform phases—1988–1996 and 1997–2007. The two reform bundles reached the point of saturation around 2007 and made excessive use of legislative policy instruments.

The availability of such a rich and comprehensive dataset has stretched the imagination of many. For example, Overbey (2024) categorized the policy documents along nine policy areas: access, accreditation, assessment and learning standards, curriculum, financing, monitoring and evaluation, new organizational structures, quality, and teachers. She found that policies related to quality increased steadily over the period 1970–2018, whereas policies related to access to education slightly declined over the same period. Bromley et al. (2024) used the topic modeling method to assess the thematic reform priorities of the 215 countries covered in WERD. They found that policies advancing datafication were on the upswing in the post-neoliberal era. Seitzer et al. (2023) disaggregated the compilation of policy documents by data source and compared, in particular, the OECD's approach to reporting, comparing, and recommending national policies with the World Bank's approach. We found that the two OECD publication series, *Education Policy Outlook* and *Reviews of National Policies for Education*, refer more frequently to experiences in other countries than the World Bank's SABER (Systems Approach for Better Education Results) database. Compared to the OECD, the World Bank is much more self-referential in its policy recommendations in that it refers to its own sources and its own portfolio of what it considers to be best practices.

### 1.3    Before and After Neoliberalism

Even though this chapter dissects the SAWA reform wave (the 1990s and 2000s) as an exemplar of a traveling reform that was selectively adopted in different countries or transfer spaces, it is still worth mentioning the waves preceding and succeeding SAWA.

*The Equal Opportunity Reform Wave of the 1970s and 1980s*

The equal opportunity reform (in the 1970s and 1980s) responded to the rapid educational expansion in the post–World War II period and, for countries in the Global South, in the post-colonial period (after the 1960s). The number of schools at all system levels, ranging from pre-school to higher education, increased significantly. In Soviet and socialist countries, more than in other countries, universal access to education was explicitly declared a political priority. In other countries, civil rights movements and other social movements that demanded the right to education for immigrants and other minoritized groups forced governments to massively increase public spending on education.

Of course, there were at the time different camps both within the group of proponents and the group of opponents of the equal opportunity reform. In the field that I worked in for close to ten years—multicultural education policy—we had at one end of the policy spectrum those who made appeals to recognize the value of diversity and cultural enrichment, whereas the critical policy analysts at the opposite end (to which I belonged) produced critical studies to document how schools reproduce inequality by filling the unpopular, unacademic tracks with students from a minority background.

Like the neoliberal reform wave, the equal opportunity script evolved over time. The equal opportunity reform period started with policies that improved access to schools and ended with demands to ensure equitable outcomes. As a result, numerous programs were introduced to support students from families with low socio-economic status in enrolling and succeeding in school. This was the period of "compensatory programs" (e.g., Project Head Start in the United States) but also the inception of multicultural education and affirmative action policies.

*Toward a New Economy of Measurable Well-being?*

The end of one reform wave is the beginning of the next. A retrospective perspective is necessary to interpret the contours of current developments adequately. Even though it is too early to determine and label the current reform cycle, we may ponder what the current trends could lead to in terms of a third-order change.

In terms of public sector reform, e-government has certainly replaced NPM. The new policy goal is to make the government more transparent, interactive, and trustworthy (see Brezzi et al., 2021). The digital era has additionally called for new legislation regulating, or rather, taming the

abuses of technology and social media. These changes have been significant across all public sectors and are, therefore, not traceable in the World Education Reform Database (WERD). As mentioned before, the datafication of education, as evidenced in the proliferation of standardized testing, was traceable in the policy documents compiled in WERD (Bromley et al., 2024). This may be interpreted as an extension of the performance-based regulation tools and institutions established during the neoliberal era. Thus, they should not be considered a third-order change—characterized by a new policy goal and new policy instruments—but rather a solidification of the reform package inherited from the neoliberal era.

However, we have witnessed in recent years several independent social movements, including the youth movement Fridays for Future, calling for immediate political action regarding climate change. These and other recent social movements asked for a broader education mandate, one that moves beyond the narrow limitations of foundational learning, that is, literacy and numeracy. In 2011, the Ministries of Finance of OECD countries approved a new framework in which they expand the kind of resources that should be made available today for the well-being of tomorrow (OECD, 2011b). They list four kinds of "capital," which they see as invaluable resources that need to be nourished to be available for the future: natural capital, economic capital, human capital, and social capital. Similar to the last neoliberal reform wave, where the OECD played a crucial reform first during the NPM phase and then, primarily through PISA for the second phase of the reform, I anticipate that the OECD's 2011 framework on the new economy of well-being, signed by the Ministers of Finance, as well as its Better Life Initiative (OECD, 2019) will have a great impact on reforms in the education sector. Currently, the OECD has established several working groups to adopt the framework for reforms at the sector level. In broad strokes, OECD's economy of well-being promotes the following:

> The "Economy of Well-being" can be defined as an economy that: 1. expands the opportunities available to people for upward social mobility and for improving their lives along the dimensions that matter most to them; 2. ensures that these opportunities translate into well-being outcomes for all segments of the population, including those at the bottom of the distribution; 3. reduces inequalities; and 4. fosters environmental and social sustainability. (Nozal et al., 2019, p. 8)

OECD's Economy of Well-being has already been transferred to the education sector and has materialized in the 2030 Learning Compass. Others have convincingly shown how new businesses have been set up that make use of the trend, observed first in Australia and the United States and now spreading globally (see Williamson, 2019; Lewis et al., 2022).

Strikingly, there is a carry-over from the datafication approach that emanated during the previous neoliberal reform era: the emphasis is currently on operationalizing and measuring student well-being. This form of institutional design (Capano, 2018)—using an old policy tool (performance-based measurement) and applying it to a new thematic priority (student well-being)—is fascinating and may be seen as an expression of layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Layering—putting something new on top of something old—is an expression of incremental institutional change. The phenomenon is also discernible in the new lucrative industrial complex that not only design educational programs but also develops tests to assess students in terms of social-emotional learning. Even though, at this stage, more speculative than empirical, the current reform wave is likely to also travel globally given the commitment of several global actors, both intergovernmental organizations (e.g., OECD, UNICEF, UNHCR) and private foundations (e.g., Jacobs Foundation, Porticus Foundation, Wallace Foundation) that, over the next few years, may possibly contribute to spreading this new global script.

## 2     COMPARING AGAINST A GLOBAL SCRIPT

Three kinds of comparisons are commonly made in the comparative study of education policy: comparison over time, comparison across space, and comparison against a global script. Various combinations of these three main types of comparisons are also conducted. In addition, each case or unit of analysis is multi-layered vertically (in terms of power relations) and multi-centric horizontally (in terms of agency).

Comparison against a norm or a script is not out of the ordinary in comparative policy studies. They are, in fact, very common in applied, evaluative research when a country's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is assessed. Global monitoring of national development is a widespread global governance tool. It has led to a flood of reports in which progress is tracked, such as UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report. Here, we are not comparing for monitoring but rather for research purposes. A good case in point is an earlier

study I carried out with Silova (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). We convened, with funding from the Soros Foundation Network, educational researchers from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Mongolia to discuss which features of the regional "post-Soviet reform package" (education expansion to eleven or twelve years, introduction of standardized tests, etc.) were adopted in their respective countries twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union. In other words, Silova and I compared against a regional script.

Defining the substance of a global script is no small feat. A clear interpretive framework with a few theoretical and methodological propositions is indispensable to guide us in such an ambitious comparison. In two other co-authored publications (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024a, 2024c), we applied an interpretive framework that was informed by three bodies of research to compare national school reforms against the global script: (i) the instrument approach, which conceives of fundamental reforms as a bundle of policies that, only in certain combinations, trigger change in the intended direction, (ii) policy borrowing research, which draws attention to the selective transfer of traveling reforms by way of focusing on context-specific reception and translation processes, and finally (iii) considerations of the temporal dimension of policy transfer, broken down into the momentum, lifespan, tempo, and sequence of borrowed policies. The latter begs for specific kinds of research questions, such as the following: At what particular moment in the policy process was there a receptiveness to the global reform in the transfer space? How and why have reform elements or policies changed over time, or even more drastically, been annulled at some moment in time? Was there a particular sequence in which the policies of one and the same reform bundle were adopted?

## 2.1   The Instrument Approach in Policy Studies

The choice of policy instruments addresses the question of how governments govern. A government uses a host of instruments to feel the pulse of what changes are necessary, demanded, and politically viable. Social movements, the media, civil society, teacher unions, political associations, and—in the age of evidence-based policy—increasingly researchers influence the establishment of reform agendas. One of the well-known textbooks on public policy labels these cues as the "defectors" of public policy (Hood, 1983). There also exist "effectors" or instruments used by a government to induce change. Hood (1983) categorized the multitude of

tools of governance into four main instruments, which I suggest labeling as follows: government by legislation, by budgeting, by incentives, and by persuasion. There is agreement that the neoliberal reform wave gave birth to a fifth instrument for steering and sustaining change: performance measurement. The state establishes standards that all state and non-state institutions need to achieve. Reformulated in the language of public administration, the principal (the state) delegates the implementation task to agents (public or private institutions) but controls the quality of performance provided by the publicly funded agents. Thus, the state continues to stay involved by monitoring the performance of the providers in terms of the established standards.

The policy instrument approach has triggered a lively debate within public policy studies more broadly (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Béland et al., 2018; Capano & Howlett, 2020) as well as more narrowly in policy studies related to the education sector (Verger et al., 2019a). Several aspects of that approach are appealing for policy transfer research, notably, the insight that the choice of policy instrument is deeply political and has repercussions on who is empowered and who is disempowered. Drawing on that approach, we differentiate between the reform goal, reform elements, and the instruments to achieve the goal. We use the following terms to capture the proposed triple differentiation: the reform's theory of change, its bundle of policies, and the choice of policy instruments to catalyze and sustain the envisioned change.

This still leaves us with the task of capturing the content of the global script. One methodological approach is to assess the content empirically, and the other is based on a review of the literature. The inter-university research team based at Stanford University (Bromley) and at the University of Toronto (Kijima) has produced several empirical studies of all the policy documents compiled in the World Education Reform Database. Complementary to this important data-driven endeavor, we may also get an idea of what SAWA claims to be and claims to achieve by reviewing the literature produced by the architects and believers in the reform. The two methodological approaches—quantitative and conceptual investigations—complement each other: Relying on quantitative data analyses alone carries the risk of losing sight of the bigger picture, notably the reform package promoted at the global level. Conversely, a literature review of what global actors promote tends to overemphasize the global script rather than what has been adopted at the country level. For this reason, I will first outline the contours of the global script in the next section based on a literature review, followed by how that script was selectively adopted at the country level (see Chap. 2).

### 2.2 *The Selective Borrowing of Discourses, Policies, and Instruments*

Our interpretive framework is informed by policy transfer research. The differentiation into the theory of change, the policy mix, and the instruments of a reform helps us disentangle global education policies: what exactly travels (or rather is borrowed or adopted) in terms of the reform package: the theory of change, select policies, and/or the preferred policy instruments of the reform? The first two adoption types have been discussed in policy transfer research. The first type in which merely the theory of change, the reform discourse, or the reform idea but not the policies associated with the reform is adopted, has been coined "discursive borrowing" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012b) or "fake borrowing" (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). For example, the idea of vouchers had great appeal in post-communist Mongolia because it was associated with choice, freedom, and democracy. Even though introducing school choice was not an option in a sparsely populated country with widely dispersed schools in rural areas, the discourse on vouchers was ubiquitous in the mid-2000s. It meant offering electives in upper secondary schools and teacher education. The second type of transfer, labeled "selective policy borrowing," has also constituted the core of policy borrowing research in education (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). In comparative education policy studies, there is now a sizeable group of researchers that examines when, how, and why traveling reforms, such as conditional cash transfer (Morais de Sá e Silva, 2017) or quality assurance in higher education (Lao, 2015), were adopted, recontextualized, and translated into the transfer space. By default, this group directs its attention to why only certain policies or features of a reform resonated in a given country and not others. Finally, there also exists a vast literature on the proliferation of standardized student testing, performance measurement, or, more broadly, on "governance by numbers" as an instrument of knowledge-based regulation (Ball, 2015; Grek & Ozga, 2008; Grek, 2009; Rose, 1991; Ozga, 2020).

In contrast, what is understudied in policy borrowing research is the differentiation between the three types of policy transfer: discursive borrowing, selective policy borrowing, and policy instrument borrowing. Without any doubt, neoliberalism revamped educational systems over the last few decades. But the question becomes what, exactly, has spread: the idea of less state and more market (the neoliberal policy goal), certain policies related to school autonomy (ranging from the professionalization of

school leadership to accreditation of all schools), and accountability (ranging from the national curriculum framework to performance pay for teachers), or the preferred instrument of SAWA (testing), or all of the above?

### 2.3    The Temporal Dimension in Policy Studies

The intellectual preoccupation with time in policy transfer processes has also experienced a remarkable trajectory of continuous refinement over the past few years. It has become widely accepted in policy transfer research that the temporal dimension needs to be broken down, at least, into (i) time period, (ii) timing, and (iii) tempo (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; see also Porto de Oliveira, 2021). This is a good start, but there is much more to the time dimension than these three features. Taking into account an instrument approach that conceives of reforms as a bundle of policies with a particular mix of policy instruments, I offer the proposition to also consider four other temporalities (future, sequence, lifespan, age) when analyzing policy transfer. Later on (Part II), I will discuss each of the proposed seven temporalities in greater detail.

Some temporalities are better known than others even if the authors themselves don't necessarily frame them as such. The following summarizes the most frequently addressed temporalities in policy studies.

**Time Period**  Consideration of the time period helps us to see the reform in its broader historical context. The neoliberal era occurred after the 1979 global oil crisis, the 1984–1985 miner strike in the UK, and during the era of the strong welfare state. Conservative governments that came into power in the 1980s vowed to reduce the state apparatus, curb public expenditures, and disempower unions. It was a time when ministries of finance hired McKinsey, Deloitte, BCG, and other consultancy companies to advise them on how cost could be cut by outsourcing, reorganization, and laying off staff. Mazzucato and Collington (2023) refer to the consultancy companies as the Big Cons. Even though they did not engage in criminal activity, they intimidated and infantilized governments and, as a result, earned incomes that far exceeded the value of the advice they had given to the governments (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Worse, they made governments dependent on their services. The governments' reliance on external advisors explains in part why the feedback loop was broken. NPM did indeed lead to privatization and deregulation but not to public savings from increasing efficiency. The initial argument for why a

radical, new public management approach was needed, dissipated already at the stage of infancy of the reform. Staff layoffs, if any, were a result of desktop computers and other technological advances but not directly linked to NPM. However, the "consultocracy" (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023) took credit for these cost savings that coincided with the NPM reform. The state institutions were not able to learn to critically reflect on their NPM reform and learn from their mistakes because the consultocracy was not only designing but also evaluating the reforms which it had set in motion on behalf of the ministries. The outsourcing of organizational learning proved to be politically fatal for governments: after the 2008 world financial crisis, voters lost trust in conservative governments, and the deregulation laws in the financial sector were revoked. In many countries, there was a political shift from the right to the left immediately following the financial crisis. The time period constitutes the temporal context at the time when the contours of the global script started to surface. For this reason, I use the terms "time period" and "present at the time" interchangeably.

**Timing**  In policy transfer research, the timing or, more concretely, a government's receptiveness for reform, or the "window for change," has been relatively well investigated (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). John Kingdon's book introducing his multiple streams framework (problem stream, policy stream, politics stream) is the most widely read book on the topic (Cairney, 2021). The metaphor is convincing—when the three streams intersect, the perfect moment for a window of change opens up—to the extent that it has led to simplification, according to Cairney (2021). Nevertheless, the multiple streams framework or, for that matter, any other punctuated equilibrium theory, lends itself to investigating timing or the momentum for receptiveness in policy transfer.

**Tempo**  Likewise, researchers with a leaning toward diffusion of innovation studies and social network theory have convincingly documented some of the factors that impact the pace or "tempo" with which policies spread around the globe. The diffusion of a reform picks up speed with every new country adopting a global reform and thereby becomes deterritorialized (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010). Eventually, it is regarded as simultaneously nobody's and everybody's reform, making the reform more easily adoptable. Of course, it matters, among others, which countries were the early adopters of a reform and whether international organi-

zations broker knowledge or lend money for the adoption of a reform. However, more research is needed to understand how exactly international organizations, in addition to funding sources made available, accelerate the spread of a reform across countries. With a few notable exceptions—Paulo Freire's adult literacy programs (Bartlett, 2003) or conditional cash transfer programs (see Morais de Sá e Silva, 2017)—reforms tend to travel always in the same direction: From countries of the Global North to those located in the Global South.

**Lifespan** In a similar way, fascinating studies are currently underway for the fourth temporal dimension: the life or the lifespan of reforms. We find the scholarship on "the life of policies and their changes in the multiple paths of transfers across the globe" (Porto de Oliveira, 2021, p. 12) of great relevance in understanding how transferred policies impact a sector. The inverse also applies: how have changes in a sector, including stakeholder replacements and shifts in political coalitions, caused modifications in the policy? Has it been watered down or even reversed as result of these changes? A compelling phenomenon is the hollowing out of policies over time, as pointedly described by Morais de Sá e Silva and Porto de Oliveira (2023). The opposite of aging and death of policies is their inscription in laws, structures, or values. However, as the dysfunctional policies of external school evaluations illustrate, not all policies that hollow out are eventually terminated. Policies tend to linger on, regardless of whether they are enforced or not. This applies especially to policies that managed to establish professions and structures that, in an effort to survive, continuously re-invent themselves and expand their scope of work. Nevertheless, some policies age, some die, and others—with a sunset clause—are meant to be short-lived. As I will discuss later (Chap. 5), a differentiation between duration or lifespan and the age of a reform may help us to better understand institutionalization processes.

**Sequence** Finally, considerations of how one policy relates to other policies of one and the same reform package matter a great deal. The same applies to stand-alone policies. What is already in place in terms of structures, beliefs, and practices affects the receptiveness and adoption of new policies. It is, therefore, important to investigate the sequence or the chronological order in which the various policies were implemented. As Tilly famously noted, "*when* things happen within a sequence affects *how*

they happen" (cited in Pierson, 2004, p. 54). Sequence analysis is wide-spread in comparative political science (Abbott, 1983; Pierson, 2004, 2015) and has found its way into education policy studies.

## 2.4  The Spatial Dimension of Policy Transfer: Place Versus Space

What time is for historians, space is for social geographers: a relational construct that creates hierarchies and dependencies. Tilly (1989), Abbott (1983), and Pierson (2004), for example, show how the temporal order of things, or preceding events, decisions, and structures, narrow the scope of actions taken in the present. Path dependency determines how global reforms are perceived and translated into existing norms, ideas, and structures. Analogously in geography, Massey (1994, 2007) coined the term "relational space" to show how social categories, including gender, ethnicity, or class, are entrenched in spatial hierarchies. In a similar vein, social geographer Prince applies an ethnographic, topological lens that "emphasizes relationality rather than proximity" of places (Prince, 2017, pp. 337–338).

The spatial turn in policy studies helped acknowledge the transnational nature of policymaking (Stone, 2020; Gulson & Symes, 2007; Gulson et al. 2023). The differentiation between place and space and a relational perspective that pays close attention to the global/local nexus is indispensable for understanding policy transfer. The latter is best captured with the term "cross-scalar approaches" (Edwards Jr. et al., 2024). In comparative education, in particular, Brown and Schweisfurth (2024) use space as an analytical category that enables us to describe context, Savage et al. (2021) coin the term "scalecraft" to better capture space as a socially crafted entity, and Hartong (2018) makes a compelling argument for using a topological lens that shows the blurred lines of the "local" and the "global" in policy transfer processes.

Throughout the book, I use five spatial differentiations that take into account the relational feature and social construction of space: place versus policy space, a country's location within the unequal world system, the scale of governance, the global/local nexus, and a country's reference societies.

Arguably, there is a renewed interest in navigating the complicated relationship between place and space. In addition to a country's location ("place"), the five aspects of the spatial dimension mentioned above are relevant for the study of policy transfer for the following reasons.

**Policy Space**  The notion of policy space denotes a country's membership or assigned status in a broader transnational community such as the community of OECD member states, the European Union, the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), the Caribbean Community, the European Union, or the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). Harmonizing legal frameworks leads to a delta convergence, whereby all member states adjust their frameworks and structures in the same agreed direction. Scholars use the Bologna framework in European higher education as an example of a voluntary transfer to establish a common European Higher Education Area (Heinze & Knill, 2008). Concretely, the Open Method of Coordination forcefully draws on non-coercive, voluntary standards and guidelines to channel higher education reform in the participating countries into the same direction (Brøgger, 2019). Policy learning from countries inhabiting the same policy space, such as the Nordic-European space, seems to be the norm and not the exception (Volmari, 2022; Karseth et al., 2022).

**Positionality Within the Unequal World System**  The positionality is based either on geopolitical criteria or, as with ODA recipient countries, on a country's Gross National Income (GNI) level. Harmonization and, in the case of aid-dependent or ODA recipient countries, coercion are the most widespread forms of policy transfer. The World Bank differentiates between four categories of countries: low-income, lower middle-income, upper middle-income, and high-income countries. Most of the OECD countries are high-income countries. A decolonial lens lends itself to showing the dependency of "aid-recipient" countries from countries labeled as "donor countries."

**Scale of Governance**  Arguably, the entry of the private sector has had great repercussions for governance and power relations. For example, the fast advance of transnational accreditation in education, such as the International Baccalaureate at the school level or a large number of private

businesses in vocational education (Hartmann, 2016), as well as in adult and higher education (Parreira do Amaral & Thompson, 2022; Brøgger et al., 2026) have relegated national educational systems to a position of inferiority making them seem backward and outdated (Steiner-Khamsi & Dugonjic-Rodwin, 2018). Furthermore, the introduction of accountability measures—as reflected in standard-setting and performance evaluation at the national level—has overturned previous locations of power, especially in federally organized education systems, shifting more power to the central on the one hand and the school level on the other (Savage et al., 2021).

**The Global/Local Nexus** Acknowledging the spatiality of power begs for a closer examination of who speaks on behalf of the "global." The global forces may be localized; that is, they should not be seen as "something" that is "out there" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012a; see also Hartong & Nikolai, 2017). In addition, the global agendas are determined more forcefully by countries in the Global North than in the Global South due to the positionality of member states within global governance structures. As a corollary, any investigation into the global/local nexus is, in effect, an analysis of how local decision-makers deal with policy agendas, programs, and policies established by powerful OECD countries.

**Reference Society** In contrast to the policy space based on ascribed membership criteria or income level, the notion of reference society reflects the country's self-selected policy space. As part of which larger geopolitical space do countries see themselves or aspire to be seen, respectively? Which countries or international organizations do they reference for lesson-drawing or policy borrowing? Political alliances and cultural considerations usually underlie a country's spatial reference points. Diffusion of innovation researchers (Chap. 5) are keen to investigate this research question because their interest lies in understanding whether late adopters learn from early adopters of a reform.

The notion of reference society overlaps with that of policy space but is not identical. In a world system where resources are distributed unequally, many non-OECD countries orient themselves toward policy advice from OECD countries. Thus, they tend to use high-income countries as reference societies rather than their own neighbors in their region.

## 3    THE SCHOOL-AUTONOMY-WITH-ACCOUNTABILITY REFORM

There is no sparsity of literature documenting the features of the neoliberal reform that conquered the world over the last three decades. However, there is less nuance when it comes to describing the various manifestations of the reform during different time periods and in different policy spaces. Arguably, the SAWA reform changed as it traveled, or as Cowen observes for all traveling reforms (Cowen, 2009): "as it moves, it morphs." In fact, most analyses tend to direct their attention to how early adopters—Australia, UK, New Zealand, and the US—bundled the reform package and then assume that the late adopters simply copied what was already in place. Even when researchers examine the SAWA reform in late-adopter countries, they keep reverting to the wholesale marketization of the education system afflicting the early adopter countries, suggesting that by the end of the reform wave, all education systems turned neoliberal. Have they really?

### 3.1    *The Evolving Global Script*

The SAWA reform evolved over time and underwent a major transformation during the handover from economists to educationalists. The handover entailed a translation of new public management into school realities. In OECD countries, this was not a straightforward one-to-one translation but rather a long process of negotiations with teacher associations, parent groups, administrators, and political parties. Teacher associations and unions, in particular, feared for good reason for the end of public schooling. Whereas the first phase of the reform wave aimed at destroying the "monopoly" of the state, the second phase—as a result of scathing criticism and broad resistance to further deregulate and privatize—brought back the state. The foundation of SAWA was neoliberal thought.

A brief recapitulation of the neoliberal reform trajectory may be in order here. As mentioned before, the neoliberal era saw two phases. The first phase exclusively focused on conservative thought that believed in the mantra of deregulation, liberalization, and privatization, best exemplified by the influential writing of economists at the University of Chicago, such as Milton Friedman. Advocates of consumer choice, he and his wife, Rose Friedman, devoted the last years of their lives visiting and advising high-ranking decision-makers in education to adopt voucher schemes. For

them, standardized testing, evaluation, or quality control were anathema because the consumer should be trusted in selecting the best product. The Friedmans and, later on, their organization Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (renamed EdChoice) entirely relied on the market mechanism and found state intervention superfluous to the extent that the Reagan administration was considering getting rid of all federal-level education authorities. There were, of course, country-specific reasons why governments bought into the reform. Dale and Ozga (1993) convincingly demonstrate the different ideological pathways of the reform among the early adopters, drawing on the examples of New Zealand, England, and Wales. In New Zealand, the reform of Tomorrow's Schools focused very much on school-based administration and charter schools. In contrast, the reform package in England and Wales introduced national reforms, including a national curriculum (Education Reform Act ERA, 1988). Preceding the reform in the UK were years of bitter battles between the conservative government and the teachers union in which the government accused and publicly shamed teachers and their associations for acting purely out of self-interest and neglecting the quality of education. The reform in the two countries was driven by two different political coalitions. Whereas the New Zealand reform was passed under a Labour government, the one in England and Wales was issued by a conservative Tory government.

The second phase was a reaction to the sweeping privatization, the deterioration of quality, and the inequities that arose from school choice and voucher schemes. Scholars such as Chubb and Moe (1990), Stanford University, documented the negative impact of deregulation on the quality of education and proposed a new, market-driven mechanism of change that would cure the ailing school reform: competition among schools improves the quality of education under the condition that schools are granted autonomy but held accountable for their outcomes. Thus, their vision of consumer choice was not just simple deregulation but rather an interventionist state that grants autonomy to schools and informed choice to parents. The change mechanism rested on the idea that competition over student enrollment would improve the quality of education. Chubb and Moe's coherent theory of change did not sit well in the education community because it still relied on quasi-market regulation. What is often forgotten is that this second phase—school autonomy with accountability—was a reaction to the devastating effects of the first phase, which had exclusively propagated an ideology of school autonomy, deregulation,

decentralization, and privatization. This second and last version of the reform package was propelled by the UK New Labour government of Tony Blair and the US democrats under Bill Clinton's administration, as well as other democratic governments that came into power around the turn of the millennium.

For policy transfer research, it is essential to differentiate between the early and the late adopters of a reform. The early adopters subscribed to the reform priorities of the first phase (autonomy) whereas the ones that joined later also recognized the important role of the state to intervene if necessary (autonomy-with-accountability). The evolution within the global scripts explains why the early adopters were systematically implementing an NPM agenda (school autonomy, decentralization, privatization), whereas the countries that adopted the reform later also added or tried at least to make a case for accountability measures and controlled choice. Action programs of political parties were, of course, decisive for this shift. Whereas the NPM reform was pushed in many countries (but not all) by conservative governments in the early adopter states (Thatcher, Reagan), the bringing-back-the-state approach was propelled by the New Labour Party in the UK (Blair) and the Democratic Party in the US (Clinton). The second phase of the reform attempted to contain the damage done by market regulation or state deregulation rigorously carried out during the first phase. Anthony Giddens, a renowned sociologist at the London School of Economics, advised both the Blair and Clinton governments on how to deal with the seemingly unstoppable privatization of state enterprise (Giddens, 1999). One political reaction was to promote public–private partnerships in response to the wave of rampant and unregulated privatization. In the literature, the politically centrist approach is referred to as Third Way Governance, in which the public sector should have some say about what the private sector is allowed to do and what not. This "Third Way" approach was to the left of conservative political parties that pushed for deregulation and to the right of leftist parties that demanded to curb rampant privatization. As part of Third Way governance, governments started to establish clear and measurable quality standards to ensure that private companies are held accountable for their deliverables. The centrist reform package only passed by holding all institutions—private and public—to the same quality standards. This meant that suddenly state institutions also became subject to quality assurance measures and had to get periodically re-accredited.

A differentiation of the concept "neoliberalism" is needed given the varied trajectories of how governments implemented neoliberal ideas. I find the analyses of Jessop (2014, 2019) and Schmidt (2009) invaluable. Jessop (2014) reminds us that social scientists use four different methods of inquiry to capture the heterogeneity of the concept: taxonomy, ideal types, cluster analysis, and logical-historical analysis. Taxonomists categorize the concept into "families" or groups of neoliberalism. Others determine the key features of the concept to identify the ideal types of neoliberalism. Those detecting clusters do so statistically by identifying typical and atypical forms of neoliberalism. The latter are considered outliers. Finally, Jessop commits to a "logical-historical analysis" that pays close attention to historical context and is theoretically informed. Based on that method, Jessop identified four types of neoliberalism (2019): neoliberal system transformation in post-Soviet successor states, neoliberal regime shifts epitomized in Thatcherism and Reaganism, neoliberal economic restructuring and regime shifts that occurred in response to inflationary and/or debt crises in countries of the Global South, and pragmatic and potentially reversible neoliberal policy adjustments in late adopter countries such as Nordic social democracies in Europe. The six features of the neoliberal regime shifts reflected in the early adopter countries, the UK and the US, are, according to Jessop (2019): liberalization to promote free market competition, deregulation, privatization to expand the profit-oriented, marked-mediated economy, introduction of market proxies in the public sector to favor efficient, effective, and economical delivery of public services, reduction in direct taxation on corporate income, personal wealth, and personal income, and finally internationalization to complete the world market through the free flow of goods and services.

A scrutiny of the relationship between the public and private sector is also at center stage in Schmidt's analysis (2009). She depicts the different models of state-market interaction and the changing role of the state during the neoliberal era.

Depending on how interventionist a state is vis-à-vis the market, the state needs to be considered, according to Schmidt (2009, p. 256), an "influencing state," "a liberal state," or an "enabling state." During the second phase of the neoliberal reform wave, there was a shift from "Laissez-faire" (let market actors do) to "faire" (do with market actors) in the US (under Clinton) and in the UK (under Blair). The private sector was elevated within a short period to partners of the state and was considered on equal par with the public sector. Thus, the UK and the US—albeit only for

a very brief time of the New Labour government (UK) and Democratic Party (US)—moved from acting as a liberal state to an enabling state. This move has by no means been ubiquitous and country variations are vast.

The changed role of the state and global circulation of goods and services advanced during the neoliberal era has also had a devastating impact on rural areas. Connell and Dados (2014) demonstrate how neoliberal politics sharpened the rural/urban divide in countries of the Global South. In contrast, other countries, such as countries in the Nordic region of Europe (notably Finland and Norway), for example, have retained their interventionist approach already during the first phase and managed to shield their societies from the worst effects of sweeping privatization and deregulation. As an influencing state, the government set clear boundaries for market involvement in the education sector or required that the privately run schools register as not-for-profit entities. Nevertheless, the role of the state has changed in many countries as a result of the neoliberal reform from being a provider to being a standard-setter in education.

### 3.2    *Policy Goal, Policy Bundle, Policy Instruments*

This section presents in broad strokes the main features of the global script-based neoliberal reform, which was largely pursued by the early adopters (Australia, New Zealand, UK, US).

**SAWA's Theory of Change**  The goal of the SAWA reform was to improve the quality of education by making schools compete over student enrollment. Entrenched in neoliberal thought, the proponents campaigned for abolishing the "monopoly of the state" and replacing it with a demand-and supply-driven regulation by the market that, in stark contrast to the inflated state bureaucracy, would be closer to the people, more cost-efficient, and more effective in terms of student learning. The proponents claimed that the quality of education would improve if parents were granted school choice and if the private sector had permission to run schools with public funding. All that mattered was that all schools, both private and public, would need to be held strictly accountable for the learning outcomes of their students. In return, schools would be granted autonomy to hire and fire teachers, administer their school budget, and develop their own pedagogical profile or specialization. The state was supposed to recuse itself and let the demand-and-supply mechanism generate pressure on schools to improve their quality of education by making

schools compete over enrolling "clients" (students). The demand–supply-driven mechanism implied that well-performing schools would attract more students and, therefore, be allotted, based on per capita financing, more public funds. According to that mechanics or theory of change, poorly performing schools would, in contrast, continuously lose their clients to the extent that they either had to eventually shut down or become subject to rigorous state-mandated quality improvement measures.

As mentioned above, the term SAWA signals that the two features of the reform are inextricably linked: autonomy is conditional on whether the school has fulfilled state-mandated standards, and the state has a strong hand in monitoring learning outcomes and in selectively accrediting schools. In addition, two key ingredients were, according to neoliberal thought, indispensable for championing the desired change: school choice and the diversification of schools in terms of what they have to offer. "Consumer" or "client" choice was supposed to make schools improve their "product" and was at the time central to the argument for a demand–supply-driven regulation (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Woessmann et al., 2009). These ingredients were supposed to set the SAWA quality improvement mechanism in motion.

Of course, there have been different pathways for adopting school choice. In the US, for example, the choice policy was coupled with voucher schemes years before the onset of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s. Vouchers arose in response to the 1954 order of the US Supreme Court to end segregated schooling for white and black students. Segregationist groups managed to design the voucher scheme to obtain public funding for largely unregulated private schools in which "white students could escape public school desegregation" (Suitts, 2024, p. 25). In the first few years, only seven Southern states adopted the voucher scheme. In the early years of the millennium, the voucher scheme gained popularity among evangelicals and other religious fundamentalists who demanded public funding for their schools. They received a significant boost during the Trump administration's Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. By 2021, however, twenty-seven states had adopted schemes similar to the ones established by the segregationist movement decades earlier. Taken together, these states spent annually more than $2.1 billion on private school vouchers.

However, policymakers in a wide range of countries resisted the introduction of school choice or reversed the policy after a while because of its proven adverse effects on equity and quality (Roda & Wells, 2013; Henig,

2008; Welner et al., 2024). As we shall see later, school choice became the sticking point for making the change mechanism work in ways that the architects of neoliberal reform had in mind. In many countries, the quasi-market mechanism failed or, as was the case in Switzerland, was not set in motion to start with. For this reason, the "third order change" (Hall, 1993) or the reform goal remained, in effect, very much a hypothetical construct or myth. Nevertheless, myths tend to endure when they are coupled with political agendas.

**The Bundle of Policies**  Proponents of neoliberal reforms identified various policies as part and parcel of the reform package. For example, the World Bank summarizes:

> the following five policy goals that are critical for enabling effective school autonomy and accountability: (1) level of autonomy in the planning and management of the school budget; (2) level of autonomy in personnel management; (3) role of school councils in school governance; (4) school and student assessment, and (5) accountability to stakeholders. (Demas & Arcia, 2015, p. iii)

Clearly, the sector development programs of the development banks (notably, the Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Banks, and the World Bank) but also, to some extent, of the Global Partnership for Education reflect these key policy priorities. They designed loan after loan, and grant after grant, to actively promote in countries of the Global South the implementation of per capita financing in education, professionalization of school leadership to improve the efficient management of human and financial resources, establishment of school boards for ensuring checks and balances at the school level, grants as incentives to make schools prepare and commit to multi-year school development plans, performance-based score cards for schools and standardized tests for students, and continuous and excessive reporting on results and performance. Given the transnational nature of the neoliberal reforms, almost identical policies, translated differently, are found both in aid-recipient countries and in countries of the Global North.

Figure 1.2 displays (in the middle) the neoliberal theory of change. It also features the most salient policies of the SAWA reform package. The left side of the figure displays policies related to school autonomy. The policies are interconnected and sequenced, listed below in the
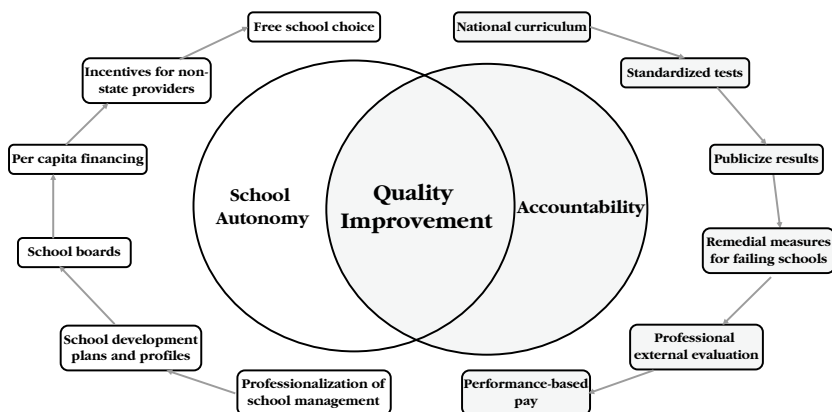
**Fig. 1.2** The SAWA reform package with its theory of change and its key policies. (*Source*: Steiner-Khamsi (2023))

chronological order in which they were typically implemented. As shown in the figure, the SAWA reform continuum starts with the professionalization of school management (minimum requirement) and—in the case of full implementation of the reform package—ends with schools, which, if adopted, puts public and private schools on equal footing, both requiring a renewal of their state accreditations every couple of years. Based on my literature review of SAWA in early adopter countries, I have listed the six most common policies considered central to the reform package, depicted in the figure (left side): professionalization of school management, introduction of per capita financing of schools, incentives for non-state providers to operate schools, requirement of schools to develop plans and a pedagogical profile, establishment of school boards that oversee the school budget and the school development plan, and school choice.

Similarly, the accountability feature of the reform (Fig. 1.2, right side) includes a series of closely related policies, typically implemented in the following sequence: establishment of a national curriculum framework, determining learning standards for each school cycle, grade, and subject, standardized testing of students at key stages of the school levels, publicizing the test results of students, external evaluation of schools, remedial measures for schools with substandard performance, and incentives for well-performing teachers (e.g., performance-based pay or bonuses).

Sequence also matters in terms of the script's two sets of policies: the school autonomy set (Fig. 1.2, left side) predated the accountability set of policies (right side). As mentioned before, phase 2 of the reform wave saw, at least in the early adopter countries, a replacement of market regulation with state intervention in the form of standard setting and quality monitoring.

**Policy Instruments** In the neoliberal era, state regulation was, as mentioned above, associated with the dark ages of centralized input regulation in which the state micromanaged schools. Strikingly, the new instrument of performance measurement was fertile ground for a new publicly funded apparatus of a different kind: an evaluative state that—with the support of an army of well-paid managers, evaluators, and affiliated agencies—establishes standards, develops indicators, and tests to monitor the achievement of the standards, demands excessive reporting at all levels of administration, and provides financial and other incentives for those that meet the standards.

As mentioned before, the proliferation of performance-based regulation has been remarkable to the extent that scholars in public policy, including Le Galès and his associates (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Le Galès, 2016), have suggested expanding Hood's (1983) taxonomy of policy instruments to include a fifth instrument: standard-setting and performance measurement. As with the other four instruments (legislative/regulatory, economic/fiscal, agreement-based/incentive-based, information-based/communication-based), the choice of instruments reflects the role the state intends to assume and how it legitimizes policy decisions vis-à-vis non-state policy actors, such as civil society, the private sector, and supranational organizations. Several scholars (Verger et al., 2019b; Lundahl & Serder, 2020; Addey et al., 2017) have noted the worldwide spread and proliferation of standardized tests, including the popularity of international large-scale assessments. Indeed, the evaluative state pursued standard setting as its new policy instrument and used standardized tests as a technology to assess the achievement of its learning standards. This is not to downplay, however, the large variety of policy instruments that are utilized to drive the reform goal of SAWA. Examples of traditional policy instruments include legislative changes (e.g., allowing the private sector to operate schools with public funding), financial incentives (e.g., competing for state-funded school improvement grants), or the circulation of public information (e.g., on school performance).

## 4    What Travels Versus What Sticks

It is necessary to rectify two misconceptions that tend to arise because of the positive connotations associated with the terms "reform" and "innovation." First, innovations don't travel because they work, and not all that travels actually sticks.

For the last few years, we have witnessed an obsession with best practices, what works, and scoping studies that promote the use of research evidence for policy and planning. As we have shown in a survey of close to a thousand respondents worldwide (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024b), there is a worldwide oversupply of platforms and digital archives that make such compilations publicly available. However, they are rarely used *unless* there is an urgent need for decision-makers or for funders to justify their action with reference to already-existing practices. A government's receptivity to learning from or referencing other countries or international standards (broadly defined) has been studied for a while. Even before the dictum of evidence-based policymaking, governments at a particular moment in the policy process made references to experiences from elsewhere. An object of great academic curiosity was, for example, the transatlantic, circular policy transfer between the UK and the US during the early period of the reform. American scholars encouraged US decision-makers to learn from the UK experiences (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990), and vice-versa, there was a keen interest among Brits to follow the US developments. What is more, despite all the scandals that had already surfaced in the early days, the two statespersons, Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK kept referring to the outstanding reform experiences in the other country (Halpin & Troyna, 1995). Put differently, the two statespersons and their supporters pointed to experiences in the other country to justify the controversial reform in their own. As I will discuss in Chap. 4, this practice of externalization is a key research topic for those transfer researchers among us who draw inspiration from sociological systems theory. It proves the point that the insistence that something is borrowed from elsewhere, or for that matter from international standards broadly defined, is often a political act rather than an act of policy learning. As Halpin and Troyna (1995) observed during the busy transatlantic policy traffic, unsuccessful policies were referenced or even transferred from the UK to the US, and vice versa. I would like to add here that in aid-dependent countries, the economics of policy borrowing also comes into play and explains in great part

the willingness to transfer policies in exchange for funding made available to implement the imported policies.

The second misconception confounds diffusion with institutionalization. Only because we are able to identify a decree, regulation, or a program which is labeled after a traveling policy does not imply that it "sticks" (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011, p. 28) or is institutionalized. Following the suggestion of Colyvas and Jonsson (2011), we may compare the degree of diffusion with the degree of institutionalization. For example, when we think of the bundle of policies that diffused globally, as depicted in Fig. 1.2, we can differentiate between those with a high degree versus those with a low degree of institutionalization. The professionalization of school management at the primary school level was, in many countries, a novel idea and was only introduced as part of the school autonomy bundle of policies. It was a change that stuck. In contrast, the idea that staff should be rewarded for their good performance also diffused globally as part of the reform but was rarely inscribed in law and even less implemented in actual practice.

There are, of course, many studies on policy design (Howlett, 2019) and on diffusion of innovation (e.g., Centola, 2021) that delve into the question of what makes an idea, practice, or policy implementable as well as scalable. Similarly, there exists a multitude of interpretive frameworks that examine the various forms of incremental institutional change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). What is meritorious about Colyvas and Jonsson's approach is their attempt to bring the two disparate bodies of research literature—diffusion and institutionalization—into a conversation with each other. That conversation is important to have when we discuss the spread and adoption of the neoliberal school-autonomy-with-accountability reform.

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# Encounters with the Global Reform

The school-autonomy-with-accountability reform resonated for different reasons in different contexts and, as a corollary, was also translated differently. The path dependency of the local encounters with the global reform becomes unmistakably clear once we adopt a comparative case study methodology. In some countries, more than in others, the selective adoption of the SAWA reform package was voluntary. In aid-dependent countries, however, the role of international donors in promoting, incentivizing, or outright insisting on the adoption is unmissable.

## 1 Comparing Across Policy Spaces

In cross-national comparisons, including the multiple case studies methodology applied here, one needs to decide which cases to select for comparison. Therefore, a few methodological comments seem in order here.

In qualitative research, we apply purposive rather than random sampling. There is an embarrassment of riches to choose from suitable sampling techniques: maximum variation, typical case, extreme case, negative case, and so on (see Johnson & Christensen, 2019). In multiple case study methodologies, pursued in qualitative comparative policy studies, but for that matter also in all other comparative disciplines (comparative political science, comparative sociology, comparative history, etc.), we furthermore need to decide how the two or more selected cases relate to each other. The selected cases need to be comparable but sufficiently different to

justify why one compares them; otherwise, the sample selection is considered overdetermined. Finally, for comparison against a global script, moreover, we need to declare how we expect the findings or "outcomes" of the selected case to differ from or resemble the global script.

I find Mill's classical scheme on the method of difference, described in greater detail by Berg-Schlosser (2015), useful for case selection in qualitative comparative policy analyses. As shown in Table 2.1, the scheme differentiates between systems and outcomes and organizes them in terms of similarity and difference.

The four different types of comparison lend themselves to inform the case selection in globalization studies.

**Similar Systems with Similar Outcomes** This design (SS-SO) is intuitive to the extent that no relevant conclusions may be made. It is, therefore, rarely used.

**Similar Systems with Different Outcomes** In normative comparative analyses, the SS-DO cell covers the sampling design of the what-went-right approach (see Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). It has experienced a remarkable boom over the past twenty years. The World Bank made with its Indicative Framework for the Education for All-Fast Track Initiative one of the first attempts to document counterintuitive or unexpected outcomes (Bruns et al., 2003). Concretely, the development economists at the World Bank examined 155 developing countries with a similar gross domestic product (SS) and then identified the reasons why 69 of them had much higher rates of primary school completion (DO) than the rest. What followed was a list of recommendations or prescriptions, respectively, of

**Table 2.1**   Case selection in comparative studies

|  |  | Outcomes | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | *Similar* | *Different* |
|  | Similar | **SS-SO** | **SS-DO** |
|  |  | Similar systems with | Similar systems with |
|  |  | Similar outcomes | Different outcomes |
| Systems |  | **DS-SO** | **DS-DO** |
|  | Different | Different systems with | Different systems with |
|  |  | Similar outcomes | Different outcomes |

what an aid-dependent government needs to do to get onto the "fast track" of development. Studies that demonstrate the different pathways or trajectories of how policymakers in different countries enact one and the same global reform also apply this case selection design. I have made use of this design to compare two OECD countries (Iceland and Switzerland) that adopted SAWA for different reasons and implemented it differently (see this chapter, Sect. 2).

**Different Systems with Similar Outcomes** As noted elsewhere, globalization researchers often resort to the sampling design DS-SO (different systems with similar outcomes) to substantiate their claim that national education systems have converged into an international model of schooling (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). For this reason, evidence of international convergence was especially compelling if the case could be made that a global script is "even" adopted, let's say, in Mongolia, that is, in countries that did not partake in the development of the script. In this chapter, I draw on this design to show that the OECD and the World Bank catapulted SAWA to every corner of the world, regardless of how vast the differences between the countries were. The outcomes were similar in terms of the selective adoption of SAWA (see this chapter, Sects. 3 and 4). A closer scrutiny of the outcomes, however, reveals, as mentioned above and explained in Sect. 2, that the reform has been enacted in path-dependent, different ways.

**Different Systems with Different Outcomes** The contrastive method—comparing systems that are most different from one another and that manifest different outcomes—is common. Examples of this approach are the Cold War studies of the 1960s, when researchers from both camps compared the (vastly different) systems of the USA and the USSR. The method leads to exaggeration and to an overemphasis on difference. As expected, US scholars (e.g., Trace, 1961), came up with a plethora of contextual factors, such as the strength of math and science education in the USSR versus the emphasis on critical thinking in the US, to explain the different outcomes.

## 2    THE POLICY SPACE OF THE OECD

In 2023 and 2024, I collaborated with researchers from Iceland and Switzerland to jointly trace the adoption of SAWA in these two high-income OECD countries (Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2024a, 2024b). For both

studies, we were able to draw on extensive dissertation research on the topic—in Iceland on Johannesdottir's dissertation (2023) and in Switzerland on Appius and Nägeli's dissertation (2017). In terms of governance structure, Switzerland is highly decentralized, and school policies are made at the cantonal level. For this reason, we focused on two cantons, of which I selected the canton of Zurich for this chapter simply because of my own policy work experience in Zurich.[1] The following summarizes the findings in terms of my interpretive framework of selective policy transfer, which differentiates between the different features—a reform's theory of change, the bundle of policies, policy instruments as well as the temporal dimension of the SAWA global script.

### 2.1    The Translation of NPM into School Autonomy

In both countries, the New Public Management (NPM) reform preceded the SAWA reform. It is important to fully understand the implications of this sequence, notably the handover from the Ministry of Finance, in charge of NPM, to the Ministry of Education, in charge of SAWA. In both countries, the theory of change was lost in the wake of that transfer. In fact, our findings suggest that we should break down the reform wave into two phases and theorize how the two-phase feature of the reform impacted the choice of policy instruments in the education sector, notably standardized testing.

During the first phase, the economistic mindset with its market-driven theory of change, illustrated in Fig. 1.2, prevailed. It arose in response to the equal opportunity policies of the 1980s that required a sizeable state apparatus to reinforce the redistribution strategy of the welfare state, notably taxing the rich to support the ones in need. Ministries of Finance with a conservative or centrist party affiliation saw the oil crisis, strikes of union workers, and the rise of a new middle class as the perfect opportunity to slash public expenditures in the social sector and freeze new hires in the public sector. A new class of people, the "consultocracy" (McKinsey, BCG, PwC, Deloitte, etc.), made projections for them on how they could cut costs by outsourcing public services to private providers (Gunter et al., 2014). Given the interest of businesses to enter the new (public) market

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[1] For the first ten years of my professional life, I worked as a policy analyst in the Ministry of Education of the Canton of Zurich and was in charge of establishing the first unit on multicultural education policies.

and given that they had to compete with other providers, they would offer their services at a lower price than public institutions.

The example of NPM in Iceland is a good case in point to illustrate how the Ministry of Finance implemented the new procurement law and, at the same time, created an incentive for state institutions to contract private providers for their educational services. The first phase of the reform wave (1991–1995) consisted of a broad governance and financial management reform initiated by the government of the Independence Party and the Social Democratic Party of Iceland. The government embraced deregulation, privatization, and tax cuts. The 1993 New Structure for State Finance Reform (*Umbætur og nýskipan í ríkisrekstri*) issued by the Ministry of Finance introduced contract management as one of the key features of the NPM budget reform. Schools and other state institutions received "block money" (Jóhannesson et al., 2002, p. 270), also known as block grants or universal budgets in other education systems, which they were able to use flexibly and autonomously for services and goods. Budget planning, disbursement, and accountability were areas directly linked to contracts made between the state institution and the provider. This was part of the new public procurement law, which encouraged the private sector to provide goods and services to the public sector. In order to liberalize the provision of public services, however, the Ministry of Finance needed to first assess what, from the perspective of professionals, a contract with state institutions would need to entail and how success or good performance should be measured. Let's keep in mind that every contract consists of a job description and expected outcomes. The question became: what are the expected outcomes in each sector?

In 1995, the Ministry of Finance, in cooperation with several line ministries, experimented therefore with contract management (*Samningsstjórnun*). Each ministry chose one of its state institutions to pilot test contract management in its sector (Ministry of Finance, 1995). The MoESC entered into a three-year agreement with the Kvenna school in Reykjavík. As part of the agreement, the school developed standards and criteria against which their performance could be evaluated. The former leader of the Association of Upper Secondary School Teachers and a teacher for many years at Kvennaskólinn, participated in the pilot project. She explained how the school leaders and teachers of Kvennaskólinn spent countless hours specifying a feasible model of internal and external evaluation and a reporting structure that would make sense for evaluating the

performance of "pedagogical services." In the end, the school published a handbook on school evaluation. However, the elaborate model from the handbook was used only twice; instead, a shorter and streamlined version was later developed for the self-evaluation of schools (Héðinsdóttir, 2012).

The first wave has been characterized as a period when the slogans of neoliberalism, including less micro-management by bureaucrats in the central administration and more decision-making authority by professionals employed by state institutions, were spread most voraciously. Along with revamping the regulations for public procurement and introducing contractual arrangements, the government actively pursued decentralization in public institutions, including in the education sector. In Iceland's compulsory schools, the move to decentralize began in 1995.

There seems to be a consensus among researchers that OECD's PISA (more than IEA's TIMSS) was the main driver for the proliferation of standardized testing in schools. This assertion needs to be revisited. The two examples from Iceland and Switzerland suggest that it was OECD's public procurement reform, and not OECD's PISA, that set in motion a quality assurance machinery, which atomized each operational element of a state institution in order to better measure it, to include the detailed list of expected services and outcomes in contracts, and to evaluate whether the providers (ideally public *and* private providers) really did the job for which they were paid from public funds. PISA merely exacerbated and institutionalized the norm-setting and quality assurance mechanisms in the education sector. In other words, privatizing state institutions was the plan; whether it was ever realized is a different question, as we shall see.

### 2.2    *Local Meaning-Making of Global Policies*

Table 2.2 provides a summary of the selective adoption of the two sets of policies (school autonomy and school accountability) in Iceland and Switzerland.[2] The two sets of policies correspond to Fig. 1.2, where I put them in the context of SAWA's coherent yet controversial theory of change.

Table 2.2 shows a great variation in the selective adoption of SAWA policies in the two countries. As mentioned above, the neoliberal ideology and theory of change dominated the reform wave during the first phase

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[2] The findings for Iceland relate to upper secondary school, whereas the ones for Switzerland on compulsory school level. Furthermore, for Switzerland only the findings for the Canton of Zurich are reported here.

**Table 2.2**  The selective adoption of key SAWA policies in Iceland and Switzerland

| | | Iceland | | | | Switzerland | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | A | P | R | S | A | P | R | S |
| **1** | **The bundle of school autonomy policies** | | | | | | | | |
| 1.1 | Professionalization of school management | | | ■ | | ■ | | | |
| 1.2 | Introduction of per capita financing | | ■ | | | ■ | | | |
| 1.3 | Incentives for non-state actors to run schools | | ■ | | | | | ■ | |
| 1.4 | Development of school study plans and electives | ■ | | | | ■ | | | |
| 1.5 | Establishment of school boards for oversight | | | | ■ | | ■ | | |
| 1.6 | School choice | ■ | | | | | | ■ | |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| **2.** | **The bundle of accountability policies** | | | | | | | | |
| 2.1 | National curriculum guide | ■ | | | | ■ | | | |
| 2.2 | Standardized tests at key stages | | | | ■ | ■ | | | |
| 2.3 | Publicized test results | | ■ | | | | | ■ | |
| 2.4 | Remedial measures for failing schools | | | ■ | | | | ■ | |
| 2.5 | External evaluation | ■ | | | | | | | |
| 2.6 | Performance-based pay | | | ■ | | | | | ■ |

*Source*: Adapted from Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2024a, p. 10)

but then was—due to active political resistance—dropped when NPM was transferred from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Education, and there translated in educational terms or pedagogized, respectively. Strikingly, the ubiquitous talk of quality improvement by means of competition trailed off during the second phase of the reform because of several factors: political changes (move from conservative to left or centrist governments), resistance from teachers associations and unions, and policy feedback from early adopter countries. The word was out in the early adopter countries that the reform had a negative impact on equity for sure, but also on the quality of education in poor neighborhoods.

Arguably, some of the policies are more central than others for setting the change mechanism in motion. More specifically, school choice is essential to ramp up competition among schools over attracting and enrolling students and, as a result, obtaining a larger budget due to the per-capita-financing scheme. It is considered a key policy of the school autonomy policy mix. Similarly, standardized testing is considered indispensable for quality monitoring and, by extension, for the accountability policy bundle. Strikingly, school choice was rejected in Switzerland but implemented in Iceland. Despite four attempts made by the neoliberal lobby—political

parties together with the neoliberal Think Tank Avenir Suisse—to pass legislation that would anchor school choice, the resolution was four times voted down with an overwhelming majority of three-quarters or more of voters: 2008 in the Canton Basel-Land (79 percent), 2010 in Thurgau (83 percent), 2011 in St. Gallen (83 percent), and 2012 in Zurich (82 percent). The opposite applies to standardized testing in Iceland: it was at first implemented in upper secondary school, but was after two rounds of testing, followed by boycotts by students and teachers, suspended.

At closer examination, however, the policies were recontextualized and meant something completely different when put in context. In practice, school choice in upper secondary schools of Iceland entails choice of educational programs. Apart from the capital area (Reykjavik) and a few other larger towns, school choice does not make sense due to the distance between schools. However, the Ministry of Education already invested in technology in the early 1990s and established in all schools well-developed distance-learning facilities. Hybrid modalities of learning has been common in Iceland, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the SAWA reform, schools were given the autonomy to develop their own educational program (Jóhannesdóttir, 2023). Students may choose to enroll in an educational program or in courses at any other secondary school in the country; their choice will be honored as much as possible. Equally important, the Icelandic rationale for school or, rather, program choice is vastly different from the market logic underlying the SAWA reform. The main reason was not to generate competition among schools that would, in turn, improve the quality of the "product" (education) but rather to improve graduation rates, reduce school dropout, and possibly even reduce the rate of youth substance abuse by introducing programs that are more closely aligned with students' interests.

The Icelandic translation of school choice took on another important turn in 1995 when the government signed the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). Driven by an inclusive-minded Minister of Education (Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, 2003–2009) and a social justice-oriented Minister of Education (Katrin Jakobsdóttir, 2009–2013) of the Left-Green Movement, school choice took on a positive connotation in another sense: In the 2008 comprehensive education law, all students were given the right to choose a school. The law prescribed the state's duty to provide education to *all students* up to the age of 18 years old (raised from 16 years old). Starting in the fall of 2009, a sizeable new group of students was admitted

to upper secondary schools who were previously excluded due to age, ability, ethnicity, nationality, or language (Harðardóttir et al., 2019; Júlíudóttir et al., 2016). The school autonomy discourse was in concert with the need to develop inclusive teaching practices that cover students' wide-ranging needs (MoESC, 2011). This commitment led to structural changes within the upper secondary school system, such as the requirement to offer special tracks and foundational learning programs for students who, prior to the enactment of the law, were excluded from "matriculation" (academic upper secondary school exit exam) and from vocational tracks.

In a similar vein, it is important to understand the Swiss rationale for buy-in into standardized testing. Again, policy actors in the education sector detested the economistic mindset about quality improvement by means of autonomy under the condition of strict accountability. Instead, two unrelated, pragmatic arguments were made that greatly resonated with politicians and parents alike: harmonization, standardization, and testing were good for student mobility, enabling families to move from one location to another within Switzerland, and they had a salutary effect on students themselves: testing encourages students to continuously self-evaluate and improve their achievements. Later, the education system also gave in to pressures from the private sector that threatened to develop their own tests for hiring apprentices unless schools administered reliable, standardized student tests on which they could depend. Regardless of the varied Swiss rationalizations for explaining the proliferation of standardized testing, SAWA's outcomes orientation has become the most visible and enduring signpost of the reform. The policy instrument has produced new structures, professions, and norms of what good education should entail. They nourish the demand for continuous learning assessment, as reflected in the new, lucrative market for tests, which schools and students buy over digital platforms and apps.[3]

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[3] Mindsteps consists of a warehouse of over 31,000 assignments that teachers may use to assess key competencies in four subjects from the third grade of primary school to the third grade of lower secondary school. Drawing on John Hattie's (2009) notion of adaptive learning, Mindsteps encourages the formative evaluation and continuous self-evaluation of students. The initiators, the cantons in the northwestern part of the country, have free access to Mindsteps; schools from other parts of the country have to buy licenses directly from the organization.

### *2.3    Aging and the Silent Death of Policies*

Very rarely do we look back at policies ten, twenty, or thirty years later to assess what has come out of them. Tracing the lifespan of policies is essential to understand the trajectory of reform waves. Policy adoption merely indicates the momentum in which a law, decree, or guideline was passed; it is not indicative of whether it was ever implemented, amended, and modified later on or dropped altogether.

In retrospect, we can see that the equal-opportunity reform (1960s–1980s) mobilized the entire gamut of policy instruments to institutionalize the reform: anti-discrimination policies—in many countries, including affirmative action policies—were inscribed in law, financial incentives were provided to state institutions to diversify their programs, teacher education was required to expand their study program to include multicultural education and inclusive education, and contract renewal with state-funded institutions were made contingent on whether the institutions followed principles and practices of the equal-opportunity reform. As seen with the affirmative action policies under conservative governments in the new millennium, not all changes are etched in stone. Some of the contested policies become new thematic priorities of reform cycles, such as affirmative action policies, that are periodically brought up by progressive coalitions and rejected by conservative forces. Nevertheless, the equal-opportunity reform managed to have an impact on values and structures. Furthermore, it created new certified and trained professions that uphold, reproduce, and sustained those new values and structures.

In a similar vein, we may identify some of the values and structures that were created and, for now, remained in place at the end of the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform wave. These are felt by school directors, teachers, parents, and students alike. For example, school directors are now required to be trained and certified as managers regardless of the size of their school, teachers now enroll in training programs that are in line with the school's development strategy, parents have grown accustomed to the fact that schools differ widely depending on the neighborhood, and students download apps and continuously test themselves in advance of quizzes administered in school. In parallel, the SAWA reform created new jobs for an army of well-paid consultants, curriculum developers, graphic designers, public relations specialists, grant writers, and coaches that help the school look attractive so that they can cherry-pick the best students for enrollment.

Even dysfunctional aspects of SAWA have become institutionalized. A good case in point is external evaluations, an important policy of the accountability bundle. NPM and then a few years later SAWA targeted a separation of oversight and implementation, a shortening of the accountability route, and designed two types of accountabilities. One type of accountability was school-based—school boards were supposed to control the school principal—and the other type was external, carried out by professional evaluators. Country after country that I reviewed in terms of the two accountability measures—school boards and external evaluation—moved away from, or never had in place, the harsh accountability measures associated with them. Rarely is a principal fired, a school closed, or teachers sanctioned because of these two accountability measures. In many countries, external school evaluation became routinized but metamorphosed from being an accountability tool to becoming a feedback measure that schools use for preparing their school development plans. Both school boards and external evaluations are largely inconsequential and ceremonial, and yet the massive amounts of paperwork associated with internal and external evaluations and the constant reporting to superiors are some of the reasons for the burnout of teachers.

Not only do bureaucracies reproduce themselves by constantly creating new tasks for which their administration is needed, but professions also reproduce themselves. The army of evaluators and consultants, both certified professions by now, brought into being as part of the managerial SAWA reform, are keeping these two dysfunctional policies alive, even though their initial function—accountability—has been buried a long time ago. Other ghosts that haunt schools are bonus payments and performance-based salaries. Even if they exist on paper, they are rarely enforced due to outright resistance by teachers, teachers' associations, or teachers unions. For example, performance pay lasted exactly eleven years in the Canton of Zurich and never came to fruition in the other canton that we examined (Canton of St. Gallen). In turn, external evaluation, as mentioned in the previous section, has hollowed out over time.

Nevertheless, most of the values and structures—both functional and dysfunctional ones—and the newly certified professionals who sustain them are here to stay. They have become the new normal. However, this does not prevent them from facing a backlash, leading to recurring reform cycles.

### 3    THE POLICY SPACE OF AID-RECIPIENT COUNTRIES

For researchers of traveling reforms, the spatial location of a country in the unequal world systems affects whether the policy transfer is voluntary or coercive. Education reform in developing countries is, in great part, driven by funding sources made available to them. A scrutiny of the donors' policy goals, their bundle of policies, and their policy instruments is therefore indispensable to understand which reform script or, in the plural, which reform scripts the donors have exported to aid-recipient countries. Indeed, a question guiding this sort of investigation is whether a singular or multiple reform scripts are transferred from institutions located in the Global North to institutions in the Global South. Do donors compete or cooperate in their quest to leave a mark on developing countries? Thematically, does each donor carve out its own niche, or do donors sacrifice self-interest over what has been agreed in international agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) lists over 150 countries and territories that received "aid" or Official Development Assistance (ODA).[4] At the other side of the spectrum are thirty-two "donor" countries. They are high-income OECD countries and are organized in OECD's DAC. In addition to the member states of the Development Assistance Committee, there exist additional donor countries—for example, China, Turkey, and Russia—that provide loans or grants to aid-recipient countries. However, they are not included in the list of OECD DAC countries because they either do not satisfy or do not want to comply with the membership criteria of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, stated as follows:

> the existence of appropriate strategies, policies and institutional frameworks that ensure capacity to deliver a development co-operation programme; an accepted measure of effort; and the existence of a system of performance monitoring and evaluation. (OECD, 2024[5])

Not all aid-recipient countries are treated equally. The poorest countries are the ones that are directly exposed to intrusive and coercive policy transfer. The seventy-five countries that the World Bank classifies as least

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[4] Downloaded on January 28, 2024: https://www.oecd.org/en/about/committees/development-assistancecommittee.htm

[5] https://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee/

developed are hit hardest by the global policy regime. These are countries that are denied loans from commercial banks or private entities. If they have a GNI per capita of $1315 or less per year, they qualify for an International Development Assistance (IDA) credit. The borrowing countries have to repay the IDA credit with very low or no interest, and they are granted an extended time period to settle their debt, typically with a loan maturity of twenty to thirty years. The attractive loan features come at a cost. In return for an IDA credit, the borrowing country must adhere to the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The SAP informs the kind of projects that the two organizations are willing to fund. Technically, the imposition is done at the stage of project design. Every IDA loan must have a non-repayable grant component. The development banks use the grant component to hire their own consultants to design the project and establish performance benchmarks that need to be reached. In poor countries, the controversial structural adjustment policies include, for example, reducing public expenditures, privatizing state enterprises, ensuring free trade (including lifting tariffs for imports), and, if necessary, devaluing the national currency. In response to vociferous criticism, the IMF and the World Bank expanded the list of conditionalities. They included good governance and poverty reduction as explicit requirements for receiving loans or technical assistance grants. The term "Washington Consensus" is associated with the structural adjustment policies that the two Washington-based international organizations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, mandate from borrowing countries to receive concessional loans. As I will show, the structural adjustment policies were the primary reason for the sweeping decentralization reform that the IMF and the World Bank imposed on borrowing countries. They occurred prior to New Public Management and school-autonomy-with-accountability reform wave. They had to do with the distrust toward post-colonial governments to properly administer the loans or grants received from Washington. Later, the decentralization reform was moved one level down—from the sub-national to the school level—and repackaged first in the efficiency and cost-effectiveness language of NPM economists and then, eventually, with the move to school-autonomy-accountability-assessment (SAAA) in the language of education policymakers.

Strikingly, the number of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that indicate education as a field of activity has grown steadily and reached

thirty by the year 2020 (Niemann & Martens, 2021). In 1945, only two existed—the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Many IOs with no direct mandate for education policy started to engage in education-related matters from the late 1960s onward. Their number increased to the extent that by the year 2023, a third of the entire population of IOs ($n = 30$) operating in part or entirely in the education sector consisted of IOs that were designed to coordinate international economic cooperation, such as the World Bank, the OECD, or the regional development banks. Education-for-mandates—such as education for economic growth, peace, international understanding, sustainable development, and a global knowledge economy—became the standard line of argumentation to fund and promote education activities in non-education IOs. Finally, Niemann and Martens (2021) find that regional IOs, composed of member states from the same region, also discovered education as one of their thematic priorities from the 1960s onward. These regional IOs include, for example, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) or Caricom (Caribbean Community).

There is a clear indication that education as a topic of global importance has expanded into multi-stakeholder organizations (e.g., Global Partnership for Education), private foundations (e.g., Gates Foundation), and international businesses (e.g., Pearson Inc.), reflecting public–private partnerships that spread worldwide like wildfire at all levels of public administration. Strikingly, education has become a field or a market, as reflected in non-education IGOs (e.g., OECD, World Bank) and non-education businesses and philanthropies that reoriented themselves to integrate education into their mandate. The World Bank used to be the most influential and most controversial global actor for aid-recipient countries, but its influence dwindled as the result of new actors contesting (China, Russia), closely cooperating (Global Partnership for Education, OECD, UNICEF), or funding and influencing the World Bank portfolio in education (e.g., Gates Foundation, Lego Foundation). Thus, the Global Education Governing Complex, a term coined by Ydesen (2019), nowadays includes the Big Five in education, as well as private foundations and international businesses, either with a primary or secondary mandate in education.

### *3.1    The Global Education Governing Complex*

A long-term historical perspective is necessary to understand the idiosyncrasies of the Global Education Governing Complex and whether the donors making up the complex propel and fund similar or different reform priorities in developing countries. A slightly more intense preoccupation with the two first movers of the SAWA reforms—the OECD and the World Bank—seems to be justified given our larger intellectual project of comparing the adoption of SAWA in the two vastly different settings: OECD countries versus aid-recipient countries.

*The World Bank and the OECD: Divided in Goal, Complementary in Policy Mix, United in the Use of Policy Instruments*
In the early years, the World Bank's education portfolio was almost identical to that of UNESCO. In stark contrast to the World Bank, UNESCO had a humanistic and human rights-driven approach to education. The connection between the two organizations was sealed through the Co-operative Agreement signed in 1964. After gaining access to countries of the Global South with the help of UNESCO, the World Bank started to distance itself from UNESCO. It became increasingly apparent that the two organizations neither shared outlooks and priorities nor a modus operandi in terms of governance. As pointed out by Elfert and Ydesen (2023), the authority of the World Bank derived from its "funding power and claims to managerial-scientific efficiency" (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, p. 100). I would like to add that UNESCO likewise had power but of a different sort: it was the only intergovernmental organization that worked on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the period of the Cold War (1947–1991) and where each state had equal political weight regardless of the country's economic standing. UNESCO's loyalty bonus, trust, and good relationship with the recipient governments should not be underestimated as an invaluable asset for the World Bank.

The relationship between the two of them eventually turned sour, and UNESCO was not prepared to implement projects on behalf of the World Bank. Signaling the advent of a new era in which both organizations were determined to work independently in education, the World Bank published its first Education Sector Policy Paper in April 1980 (World Bank, 1980). This very first education-related strategy had all the signs of a knowledge bank in the making, into which the World Bank steadily grew

over the past fifty years. According to the prominent education economist George Psacharopoulos, who served as a long-time senior advisor at the World Bank,

> [t]he 1980 Policy Paper does not only reflect the fact that Bank operations are now increasingly based on the results of research, but also that the Bank conducts research of its own and will continue to do so in the future. This is extremely welcome for the Bank has access to a wealth of comparative education material outsiders could not even dream about. (Psacharopoulos, 1981, p. 144)

It is important to recapitulate that the OECD promoted first NPM and then SAWA in its member states. The World Bank, with a time lag of a few years, did the same in poor aid-dependent countries. After their initial focus on new public management reform that both organizations rigorously pursued in their respective client countries (World Bank) or member states (OECD), respectively, the two intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) adopted and translated the reform—its policy goal, its bundle of policies, its instruments—in ways that suited their organization's broader mission. The thematic division of labor between the organizations is noticeable. The OECD integrated SAWA into its larger portfolio of promoting twenty-first-century labor skills (see Seitzer et al., 2023), whereas the World Bank brought SAWA in sync with its other managerial reforms that were meant to implement structural adjustment policies in all sectors, including in the education sector.

For the first three decades of its independent operation in the education sector (from the 1980s onward), the World Bank pushed through, against all odds, decentralization policies. Starting with the influential review of experiences with decentralization policies, carried out by Rondinelli et al. (1983), the World Bank differentiated between four types of decentralization: deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatization. Its decentralization agenda involved the onset of "economic deconcentration," nowadays referred to as deregulation. Rondinelli et al. (1983, p. 5) considered it the "proper solution" to the problems of inefficiency, corruption, and anarchy "to find ways of removing obstacles in order to allow the market to operate more freely." Thus, the commitment to devolve decision-making authority from the central level to lower levels of administration was driven by two concerns: managerial self-interest and political alliance-building. On the one hand, the Bank depended on reliable

counterparts in-country that manage their projects efficiently and effectively, that is, have a demonstrable impact. On the other hand, the two superpowers (the USA and the USSR), were in a race to win over the non-aligned countries in the "Third World" to join their alliance (Westad, 2005). The capitalist alliance preached less state, a free market, and more prosperity, whereas the communist one spread the gospel of a planned economy and a strong state that takes care of its citizens, especially in terms of education and health provision. By collaborating and strengthening the sub-national level (regions, districts, municipalities), the World Bank hoped to achieve two goals simultaneously: reduce and weaken the state apparatus at the central level and find reliable managers for the implementation of their loans at the sub-national level. Even though the broader capitalist ideology of anti-statism has remained largely intact to this day, several noteworthy semantic shifts occurred over the past five decades, explained in the following.

Even though decentralization reform was, from the start, engrained in World Bank programming, the support for the reform expanded and accelerated in tempo during the neoliberal era of the 1990s. Hossain (2023) identified 910 projects at the primary and secondary school level that the World Bank had implemented over the period 1965–2020 in 99 countries. He found that two-thirds, or 69 percent, of the projects launched after 1988 had a "de standardization" component, defined as devolving educational responsibilities and decision-making authority over policies from the national to the sub-national and school level. In comparison, only one-quarter of projects had such a component between 1965 and 1988. Hossain also noticed a shift in the devolution of responsibility and decision-making authority from the sub-national to the school level at the turn of the millennium.

*Repurposing Failing Policies, 1980–2020*
Between 1980 and 2020, the World Bank reframed the objective of decentralization three times. These discursive shifts occurred either because the policy goal was achieved and a saturation occurred (e.g., "economic deconcentration" or deregulation), negative evaluations of the reform were made public, or new reform priorities surfaced for the World Bank. The commitment to decentralization remained intact, but the reform meant something different and, therefore, consisted of a different bundle of policies.

The first shift occurred around the millennium. It was a clear shift from funding the sub-national level to strengthening the school level. There was an abundance of studies documenting that decentralization from the central to the sub-national level increased bribery, and nepotism and, as hinted at in the SABER briefs, became subject to elite capture:

> [st]ructures of local accountability may not be in place in developing countries and "capture" by local elites may frustrate delivery of quality and equitable public service delivery of education. (World Bank, 2011a, p. 2)

Reinsberg et al. (2019) examined the impact of the sweeping decentralization reform, which the IMF and the five international financial institutions of the World Bank Group[6] advanced with great rigor since the 1980s. The authors examined 141 developing countries over the period 1985–2014. They combined two theoretical frameworks—world systems theory and Weberian notions of (good) bureaucracy—to define and measure the quality of state services at the sub-national level. According to Max Weber's (2019), theory of bureaucratic quality, a capable state has three features in place to ensure bureaucratic quality: legal rationality, hierarchical organization, and incorruptible staff committed to delivering high-quality public services. The authors found a negative impact in all three areas. Whenever one of the 141 countries implemented a devolution of decision-making authority from the central to the sub-national level, the reported incidence of corruption increased by an average of roughly 18 percent.

The governance reform encountered harsh criticism also from within the World Bank Group. An internal evaluation report of the World Bank was equally critical of the decentralization reforms propelled by the World Bank Group since the 1980s:

> The view that decentralization has the potential for improving public service delivery and infrastructure has been based on two premises, namely that SNGs [subnational governments] are more aware of local conditions, and

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[6] The World Bank Group consists of the following five international finance institutions (IFIs): International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), International Development Association (IDA), International Finance Corporation (IFC), Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIG), and International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). The first two (IBRD and IDA) make up the World Bank.

that they are closer and therefore more directly accountable to local populations as compared to central governments. However, the evidence suggests that these premises may not always hold. Indeed, SNGs are not immune to the governance risks, such as elite capture, clientelism, and capacity constraints, that have plagued many national governments and often motivated the need for decentralization. (World Bank, 2018, p. 1)

This first shift reflects an instance of organizational learning, where the World Bank acknowledged one more time its past mistakes, every time with vast repercussions for those who had to live with the ill-conceived policies. Another case of policy reversal was the introduction of tuition fees first in primary and then in secondary schools. The World Bank, after promoting for years this controversial practice in African countries, abolished it in the new millennium. Enrollment skyrocketed with immediate effect after the World Bank reversed course on their directive. Schools in Kenya or Tanzania, for example, ended up with overcrowded school classes but with a rampant shortage of teachers. However, there was no remorse for denying a generation of Africans access to school. Just to the contrary, the World Bank utilized the horror scenario of overcrowded classrooms with one teacher and 150 students as a justification for why investment in quality education, rather than access, is essential.

Similar to reversing its course on tuition fees, the disastrous effects of strengthening the sub-national level were not addressed. The World Bank simply distracted from the critique by pinpointing the salutary effects of school-based management. It did so by resorting to the principal-agent theory. According to that framework, the principal (the government) oversees the provision of education and has agents in place (schools) that accomplish this task. Once the principal delegates the task to the agents in charge of implementing it, the schools (acting as agents of the principal) are more motivated and more efficient in carrying out the task. In terms of World Bank lending, several project components were put in place to strengthen school-based management: grants for schools, school development plans, school councils, per capita financing, and professionalization of school management by funding training programs for school directors. The reversal of decentralization policies and the new focus on school-based management was explained with the school-know-better and schools-do-better (than bureaucrats at the central level) arguments, as illustrated in the excerpt from the SABER brief:

> Greater autonomy at the school level helps schools fight for central resources since they can use the indicators of assessment to render accounts of student performance and in the process use moral persuasion to get increased funding from the central level. (World Bank, 2015, p. 2)

The second reframing of the rationale for decentralization or, by then rather, school-based management (SBM) becomes glaring when we compare how the World Bank presented the benefits of SBM before and after the discursive shift. Initially, the World Bank promoted SBM exclusively for managerial and fiscal reasons: fewer opportunities for financial leakage if the route for money flow is shortened (making money flow directly from the treasury to the school), greater motivation of school directors to eliminate ghost, surplus or low-performing teachers if they have to make decisions on human and financial resources, and again, last but not least, having a professional counterpart at the school level that is accountable for the implementation of the grant-to-school programs, popular with the development banks but also with UNICEF ("child-friendly schools"), as well as bilateral donors (e.g., JICA or DANIDA). During the second discursive shift, the managerial rationale for SBM was swapped with a narrowly defined quality rationale. SABER replaced in the name of quality improvement SAWA with SAAA: School autonomy-accountability-assessment. The shift is reflected in the World Bank Group's 2020 Education Strategy entitled Learning for All (World Bank, 2011b; see Klees et al., 2012). The strategy emphasized foundational learning and the testing of it.

A third shift is currently on the horizon that resembles the features of NPM's successor public management reform: e-government. E-government goes hand in hand with datafication, governance by numbers, and social accountability. Reform waves burn out of natural causes once they reach saturation, yet more common than not they are criticized for their shortcomings. As the multicultural education policies of the 1980s were criticized for overemphasizing cultural diversity rather than structural inequality, so were the NPM reforms of the 1990s and 2000s attacked for creating "policy disasters" (Dunleavy et al., 2005, p. 468). The three components of NPM—disaggregation (e.g., purchaser-provider separation, agencification, decoupling policy systems), competition (e.g., league tables of agency performance, quasi-markets, voucher schemes), and incentivization (e.g., respecifying property rights, light touch regulation, capital market involvement in projects)—led, according to Dunleavy

et al. (2005), to more harm than benefits. The authors demonstrate convincingly the negative repercussions of the reform in the early adopter countries of NPM which they identify as follows: Australia, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. New Zealand, a small country of 3.5 million people, ended up by the late 1990s having 300 separate central agencies and 49 tiny ministries, not counting the numerous institutions in charge of health and education services. What the authors find equally grave is the ignorance of NPM enthusiasts with digital-era governance (DEG). Technology changed the way a government connects with people and raised the expectation that citizens have of the government in terms of fair, transparent, and rational governance. The NPM structures in the new millennium gradually reversed and the principles stalled because the NPM reform missed, according to Dunleavy et al. (2005), the opportunity to reinvent itself in ways that incorporate the three principles of digital-era governance: reintegration (e.g., rollback of agencification, joined-up governance, re-governmentalization, etc.), needs-based holism (e.g., client-based or needs-based reorganization, one-stop provision, interactive and "ask once" information seeking, etc.) and digitization processes (e.g., electronic service delivery, new forms of automated processes, radical disintermediation, etc.).

The push for implementing e-government in the education sector has surfaced a perennial challenge: how to govern by numbers at the global level when the numbers are wrong or not provided by national level authorities? It is fair to say that EMIS (Education Management Information System) is for the education sector what the Structural Adjustment Programs are for the Ministry of Finance: a non-negotiable intervention that the recipient governments must accept under all circumstances. The policy instrument of performance measurement stands and falls with accurate data, materialized among others in sector analysis with statistical information, an education sector strategy with baseline data and benchmarks, and a results framework with measurable outputs and outcomes. Despite being prioritized by donors, educational statistics are implemented at best at the national level. How the data is generated is a different question given that, often, no reliable data is available at the sub-national or school level. The budgetary impact of data is great. In a resource-poor environment, it is not out of the extraordinary that Ministries of Education claim a higher enrollment count than the Ministries of Finance, and departments within a ministry inflate the number of their beneficiaries simply to secure their needed budget. The datafication in public

administration, including in the education sector, is a logical consequence of performance-based regulation and, more recently in the context of international development cooperation, results-based finance.

### 3.2    The Instruments of Global Governance in the Absence of Regulatory Power

As discussed before, a government has different instruments at hand to induce and sustain change. There are five that are commonly used at the national, district, or municipal level: legislative/regulatory, economic/fiscal, agreement-based/incentive-based, information-based/communication-based, and performance-based/standards-based instruments (Le Galès, 2016; see also Hood, 1983). Global actors may not directly impose *legislative changes* in the recipient countries and then sanction them if they do not comply. However, all the other four instruments are at their disposition to make recipient governments change their laws and regulations in line with the donor's agenda.

The Public Expenditure Reviews (PER) are illustrative of the *economic/fiscal instrument* used by global actors. The PER is prepared for each recipient country by the World Bank in collaboration with the country's Ministry of Finance and tracks public expenditures and issues quite concrete policy recommendations. The objectives of PERs are summarized as follows:

> PERs help diagnose spending problems and help countries develop more effective and transparent budget allocations. The objective is to establish a baseline understanding of key fiscal management and policy challenges, highlight priority reform areas for policymakers, and set the agenda for the next phase of budgetary planning. (World Bank, n.d.)[7]

Perhaps the most widely used tool to influence governments is the third form: *agreement- and incentive-based* instruments. It would be wrong to assume that the IMF and the World Bank are the only intergovernmental organizations that tie aid to specific conditions. For the IMF and the World Bank, macroeconomic, political, and social conditionalities do indeed matter, as reflected in their structural adjustment policies, good

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[7] Downloaded on January 26, 2024: https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/boost-portal/publications#2

governance, and poverty alleviation. Two more sector-specific forms of conditionalities, imposed by many donors on recipient governments, ensure alignment with the donor's priorities: programmatic and policy conditionalities.

Programmatic conditionality denotes the practice of financially incentivizing poor governments to implement reform priorities that are in line with the beliefs, experiences, and capacities of the donor. This type of conditionality is not new. Written during the period of the Cold War, the comparativist Brian Holmes (1981) found that, regardless of circumstances, British and American experts almost always favor the introduction of a decentralized system of educational administration, whereas Soviet and German Democratic Republic experts always recommend the introduction of polytechnical education in countries they advise. Since then, the Soviet empire collapsed, and the German Democratic Republic was incorporated into Germany. Nevertheless, the practice of transferring the donor's reform priority and, with it, the donor's capacity to design and monitor its implementation in low-income countries is very much alive. Holmes' findings could easily be updated with current observations, such as the Government of Japan prioritizing math and science education reform, the Governments of Switzerland and Germany (still) technical-vocational education, or the US Parent Teacher Associations. Not only bilateral donors follow their own logic or script, but also private foundations. For example, the Lego Foundation funds learning by play, the Gates Foundation the use of technology for foundational learning, or the Soros Foundation Network used to fund influential global programs on debate and critical thinking.

In addition to these programmatic conditionalities that apply to all donors, small and large, intergovernmental and non-governmental, there also exist policy conditionalities. This type of conditionality has surfaced in the past two decades in response to the ineffectiveness of aid. International development cooperation is plagued by its larger predicament: the reforms are donor-driven and donor-funded and tend to fund only a sample of pilot schools, pilot districts, or pilot regions. The donor unrealistically expects that the government would then scale up, with their own funding or with funding from other donors, the reform countrywide. Precisely because policy changes get stalled or even reversed as soon as external funding dries up, donors have become creative on how to ensure that their financial allocation has not only been used to generate activities ("output") but also had an impact ("outcomes"). The recent modality of

results-based financing, pushed by the World Bank and adopted by a steadily increasing number of bilateral donors, puts additional emphasis on outcomes that the two sides have agreed on in their contracts. Other donors created mechanisms to directly target the system level and thereby achieve their desired outcomes. For example, the Global Partnership for Education launched in 2022 system transformation grants and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) differentiates between project and policy components of the loan. The project component funds project activities such as hosting workshops, software development, completion of scoping studies, and so on. In contrast, the policy component requires the government to make legislative changes (laws, decrees, regulations) and organizational changes to ensure that the activities implemented by the program component are sustained beyond the duration of the grant period. A good case in point is ADB's most recent education sector development program in Kyrgyzstan 2015–2023 (ADB, 2023), which funded curriculum and textbook development in middle and lower secondary schools. The overall program budget was USD 22 million, of which USD 12 million was earmarked for the project component and USD 10 million for the policy component. A total of thirty-two policy actions had to be implemented by the Ministry of Education in order for the ADB to release the first and the second tranche of the payment (ADB, 2023, see Appendix 10). Examples of policy actions that the government had to undertake include the establishment of a coordination council that reviews curricula and instructional material, adopting new policies for textbook development, which opens the market to the private sector, and preparing a legal framework for a textbook rental scheme.

Some of the required policies are not only disregarding but in direct contradiction with the country's education law or even constitution. Even though households pay all kinds of informal fees for school-aged children, the education law in most post-Soviet education systems guarantees the right to free education. Yet, development banks interpret that requirement loosely. The Asian Development Bank, for example, advocates for a textbook rental scheme wherever it supports curriculum and textbook development. These are just a few examples of the interventionist approach used by donors to induce and preferably sustain reform. Designed to have a lasting impact, the donors curiously don't look back to examine how many of the prescribed policy actions remained in place three, five, or ten years after the required changes were made.

The fourth tool of government, governance by persuasion or *information and communication-based governance,* has experienced explosive

growth in the digital era. The OECD has made a concerted effort—with PISA-D and its outreach to non-member states—to become more visible in this area, including in aid-recipient countries. The turn toward evidence-based policy has further boosted the trend to make best practices, case studies, what works, and other studies widely available. Possibly a victim of their own success in reinventing themselves as global knowledge depositories, the Big Five (the World Bank, the OECD, the Global Partnership for Education, UNESCO, and UNICEF) moved away from merely collecting and sharing information to also providing informed policy advice. Two prototypical knowledge brokerage initiatives are worth mentioning here explicitly: the Building Evidence in Education Group (B2E), a donor working group launched in 2012, and the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP), established in 2020 and co-sponsored by FCDO, UNICEF, USAID, and the World Bank. Apart from such joint initiatives, the global actors in education not only compete with each other over influencing decision-makers, but they also have to grapple with businesses such as McKinsey, Cambridge Education (member of the Mott MacDonald Group), Boston Consulting Group and others that provide advisory services in the Pakistani province of Punjab, in Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and India, respectively; only to name a few examples (see Stone et al., 2019). Curiously, the very same governments that receive external financial assistance also use their own funds to solicit policy advice from businesses of their own choice. Different from international organizations that insist on being listed in sector analyses, sector plans, and other government-issued documents as authors or funders, consulting businesses agree to remain covert and operate as backstage advisors.

Finally, similar to governments, governance by numbers, or *standard-setting and performance-based* regulation, was first discovered by the OECD and the World Bank starting in the 1980s and is now used by the majority of international organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) as a widespread instrument to impact national development. There is international ranking, naming, and shaming available for every conceivable indicator, such as the Human Capital Index (World Bank), the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International), or the World Happiness Index (United Nations). The fifth instrument—governance by standard-setting and performance-based regulation—facilitates network governance, that is, a form of governing that includes non-state actors such as the private sector and civil society. Phrased differently, "governance is about establishing, promoting, and supporting a

specific type of relationship between governmental and non-governmental actors in the governing process" (Howlett & Ramesh, 2014, p. 318). The inclusion of non-state actors in agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy implementation has been summed up as a shift from government to governance.

Elevated to a global level, governance also captures the idiosyncrasies of today's aid architecture, notably the lopsided relationship between international governmental organizations and governments. For the past two decades, donors have insisted on establishing baselines and targets in their loan and grant agreements. The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness lists managing for results and mutual accountability as two of the five principles of "smart aid," with the others being ownership, alignment, and harmonization. International comparison is the method of inquiry, and global monitoring of national development is the governance tool. At the *global level*, the OECD and the World Bank are the first movers that used data and international comparisons for global norm-setting and monitoring national development. As previously mentioned, the The Big Five in international educational development grew over the past few decades into data and knowledge depositories. According to Jarl Bengtsson, a former head and long-time staff member (1971–2002) of OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), the 1980s were the time when CERI started to develop "the strong focus on educational standards and interest in indicators" (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 2), which then led to its International Education Indicators (INES) program, the *Education at a Glance* series, and later on PISA (see Grek & Ydesen, 2021). The World Bank also started to invest in indicator development in the late 1980s: it expanded its databank progressively from 116 indicators in April 1989 to 1600 indicators in October 2018.[8] It thereby linked evidence to numerical data and making policy recommendations based on that evidence. In comparison, UNESCO established its Institute for Statistics only in 1999 and its Global Monitoring Report unit in 2002. GPE was only established in 2003 (under the name Education for All-Fast Track Initiative). Similarly, UNICEF started to build its quantification regime in the new millennium. Governance by numbers has nowadays become

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[8] https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/stories/world-development-indicators-the-story.html

ingrained in how bureaucracies operate and the circulation of data has in and of itself an impact on policy decisions (Piattoeva et al., 2018).

More than other sectors, the education sector is under constant public scrutiny by an interested and informed public. We deal with a democratization of expertise in the education sector that is juxtaposed with the health sector's highly specialized and exclusive technical knowledge. Any reform in the education sector becomes instantaneously a matter of public contestation and debate. All adults see themselves as experts in education, have strong opinions of what good education should entail, and do not shy away from turning their personal preferences into a political agenda. Given the potential for public contestation, government officials in the education sector tend to insist that their policy decisions are based on evidence and not on partisan political orientation. The comparative intersectoral study by Christensen and Hesstvedt (2024) examined the use of research evidence in the twelve ministries of Norway from 2000 to 2020. The two league leaders are the Norwegian Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Families. On average, the policy documents (called White Papers) of the Ministry of Education make 31 references per 100 pages to studies and reports (Christensen & Hesstvedt, 2024). Similarly, the Ministry of Children and Families subscribes to the use of research evidence for substantiating its policy decisions, as seen in the large number of references in their White Papers (25 references per 100 pages). At the other end of the spectrum are the Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These two ministries use other sources and arguments to justify their policy decisions. They make no references to studies, reports, and other knowledge products. They simply issue their orders without trying to convince their constituents of the wisdom of their plan of action.

In another study on the Norwegian policy context, we examined the last two curriculum reforms using bibliometric network analysis (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2019; see also Karseth et al., 2022). We found that the majority of references in official documents were directly or indirectly related to recommendations of the OECD, first OECD's curriculum framework Definition and Selection of Key Competencies (DeSeCo) and later on other key OECD studies and reports. These documents enabled the Ministry of Education to first establish national curriculum standards and later put in place a monitoring system (notably standardized testing) that periodically evaluates the achievement of the learning standards.

Standard-setting relies on data and evidence. However, there is little agreement on the quality and intersubjectivity of these sources. The politics of evidence-based policy advice has been well scrutinized across public sectors and global actors. Littoz-Monnet and Uribe (2023) investigate one of the analytical tools of the World Health Organisation (called Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development, and Evaluation GRADE) and find a "methods regime" at play with a clear hierarchy of what counts as "policy-relevant research" and what does not. Quantitative measurement tools have been central to the exercise of particularly effective forms of soft power in global politics, where the possibility to formulate "hard law" is often lacking. It is using technical knowledge (quantitative and highly specialized) that international bureaucracies draw on to justify their global agenda and establish normative frameworks for collective action. As Niemann and Martens (2021) poignantly stated, it allows global actors to exert soft power with hard facts.

## 4    SAWA NORTH, SAWA SOUTH

Having presented why, how, and when the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform package was adopted not only in OECD but also in aid-recipient countries, the question becomes: Are we dealing here with fundamentally different reforms or alternatively, was the package from the Global North simply transferred, possibly with a few adaptations, to countries in the Global South?

Of course, global actors such as the OECD, the World Bank, and others provide the fuel for the engine that catapults reforms from one corner of the world to another. It is also uncontested that the circulation of reform ideas is facilitated when experts and decision-makers meet at conferences, publish on the Internet, or change jobs and thereby bridge different professional communities. I offer the proposition to label the impact of individual boundary spanners on the diffusion of innovation as the Maris-O'Rourke Effect. In terms of social network theory, O'Rourke was a bridge between OECD and non-OECD countries, between the national and global level, and between government and donor agencies. One of the chief architects of outcomes-based education in New Zealand, Maris O'Rourke, was appointed the first Education Director in the Human Development Department of the World Bank in the mid-1990s. When

O'Rourke moved from New Zealand to the United States in 1995, outcomes-based education and SAWA's key policies moved with her. It then experienced explosive growth in the borrowing countries of the World Bank (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Sir Michael Barber's relocation to different institutional settings had a similar effect: He moved from working as a teacher (in Britain and Zimbabwe) to working for the teachers union (National Union for Teachers), for academe (Institute of Education, University College London), for the government (Blair administration), for consultancy businesses (McKinsey, Pearson, Boston Consulting Group), for international development cooperation (FCDO), for his own business (Delivery Associates), and back to academe as a high-level administrator (University of Exeter). He bridges these institutional settings and carries with him his message of outcomes or results-based reform to all these different settings or worlds. Maris O'Rourke is now a writer/poet and Sir Michael Barber Chancellor of the University of Exeter.

The Maris-O'Rourke Effect explains in part how a reform travels from point A (country, level, public sector) to point B. What happens with the reform upon arrival or reception, respectively, is a different question altogether.

### *4.1    The Evolution of the Global Reform Script*

A recapitulation of how the reform evolved will help us to engage in a contextual comparison: the reform lasted thirty or more years and, in a struggle for survival, continuously reinvented itself in response to criticism, pushbacks, and policy learnings. These reinventions or discursive shifts occurred because supporters kept presenting the reform as a solution to the challenges of the day. Let us not forget that the reform was a package and not only a singular policy. Therefore, it afforded decision-makers to selectively adopt features of the reform. Since new challenges tend to pop up all the time, the composition of the policy bundle, supposedly addressing the challenges, also changed over time.

In OECD countries, the SAWA reform became the coherent and controversial package presented in Fig. 1.2. Similar to its ideological foundation—NPM—SAWA evolved, as mentioned above, over time. Concretely, as will be reiterated in the following, in the beginning, only the NPM-induced governance changes (autonomy) were promoted (depicted on the left side in Fig. 1.2); then, over time, when the reform was translated

into the logic of the education system, accountability was added on (depicted on the right side in Fig. 1.2), bringing the entire neoliberal SAWA reform package to fruition. In the two policy spaces, the evolution experienced vastly different discursive shifts. A periodization helps to bring to light the discursive shifts.

In *OECD countries*, it started out with a New Public Management reform, during which all public sectors, including the education sector, were reorganized. The central government devolved decision-making authority from the central to the sub-national level. The new procurement laws, furthermore, mandated state institutions to publicly announce bids for goods and services, encouraging the private sector to participate as a provider. Granting choice to the customer (parents/students) and greater autonomy to state institutions (schools) would set in motion, in NPM theory of change, quality improvement because the providers would compete, maximizing the number of customers (enrollments). At that stage, there was no talk of accountability or quality assurance. This precursor stage of SAWA was led by the ministries of finance and took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The left side of the SAWA script (see Fig. 1.2) took on shape during that period.

In a second phase, the Ministries of Education were charged with translating the concept of "goods and services" into educational terms. To reinstate the state's role, they defined what "quality" entailed and ensured that both public and private providers adhere to the same quality standards. This was the period when the bundle of accountability policies took shape and when one Ministry of Education after another formulated national curriculum frameworks that specified the skills and competencies that students were supposed to learn. OECD's PISA and DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Key Competencies) supported the transition from school autonomy to school-autonomy-with-accountability (as depicted in the left and right sides of Fig. 1.2, respectively). The coherent neoliberal reform with its bundle of policies was neatly packaged in the first decade of the millennium. This second phase was led by the Ministries of Education.

The third phase is characterized by a major scale-back of the accountability component in response to the economic crisis (2008), teachers union pushback, and negative accounts about the impact of the reform on equity but also on quality. Why should schools be held accountable if the autonomy of schools is not fully granted? With the exception of standardized student assessment, the other accountability measures, such as school

boards, internal school evaluations, external school evaluations, or publishing the students' test results, were either not rigorously enforced or became meaningless. The second phase was driven by teachers' associations and unions.

The fourth phase saw an emphasis on what stuck and what was institutionalized from the ambitious SAWA reform package. In many countries, school-based management, standardized testing, and liberalization of providers endured. All the other policies that, in combination, were supposed to set in motion the neoliberal theory of change either hollowed out, were rejected, or were reframed in ways that had nothing to do with SAWA's policy goal. At the tail-end of the SAWA reform wave, the proliferation of standardized testing at all levels of education and across countries and useless and inconsequential reporting at all levels of administration became the two signposts of SAWA. This final stage is characterized by datafication, a logical consequence of SAWA, and a performative feature of technology.

The end of a reform wave is the beginning of the next. The global script started out with NPM and ended with NPM's successor public administration reform: e-governance.

In *countries of the Global South*, however, SAWA underwent a different kind of discursive shift, as reflected in the World Bank policies transferred to its client countries:

The first phase predated NPM and took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the World Bank could no longer rely longer on the partnership with UNESCO to implement its projects. It was in search of reliable and efficient managerial partners in developing countries. Driven by self-interest and anti-statist, anti-communist ideology, the World Bank launched a rigorous decentralization program that revamped government structures (devolving decision-making authority from the central to the sub-national level), promoted the privatization of state entities, deregulation, and market regulation. The decentralization reform affected all sectors and programs in the World Bank, including their nascent education programs.

In the second phase, the decentralization program was more specifically translated into the education sector and intermingled with the neoliberal talk of quasi-market reform and client centrism. During this period, the voucher scheme in Chile (1981) and community-based management EDUCO was tested in El Salvador and several other countries in the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium (see Edwards Jr., 2018).

Based on the catastrophic results of decentralization to the sub-national level, the World Bank repurposed the program. It started to support school-based management rather than management at the sub-national level.

In the third phase, the World Bank had a coherent program in place and its own institution (SABER) to document progress and fallback, respectively, on that reform package. SABER was established in 2011, and it had its own theory of change (SAAA) that was similar but not identical to OECD's SAWA script. The third A in school-autonomy-accountability-assessment is indicative of the time period during which SABER was established: the rise of international large-scale assessment, notably PISA. The proliferation of ILSAs in terms of the number of tests administered per country, the variety of tests, and the number of countries that have participated in such tests since 2000 (Verger et al., 2019; Addey, 2017) was startling. During this phase, again, criticism arose about whether school autonomy improves student learning in resource-poor environments. Hanushek et al. (2011) analyzed PISA results (2000–2009) in forty-two countries and found that school autonomy has a positive impact on rich countries but a significantly negative impact on schools in developing countries. Thus, the emphasis shifted to foundational learning and testing. The World Bank's Education Strategy 2020 (World Bank, 2011b), the Human Capital Project, and the Learning Matrix Taskforce were created to narrow down educational Goal 4 of SDGs to one target: foundational learning (Mclean, 2023). The plan failed on paper, but it materialized in terms of the unequal funding made available for financing the seven education-related targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The last phase in the post-neoliberal era is like the one in OECD countries: the move toward e-government and the use of technology for instruction. The COVID-19 pandemic gave a boost to the plan to support ICT in developing countries. It is now in high gear.

The World Bank and the OECD were leading the effort to convince multilateral donors and private foundations to lower the ambition of the SDG 2030 to achieve seven targets by 2030 and instead just focus on one. Within a short period of time, the long-held Human Development Index was replaced with the Human Capital Index, developed by the Bank. There are two ways how the World Bank accelerated the spread of standardized testing: Similar to the Global Partnership for Education's Education Sector Implementation Grant (ESPIG), where "assessment" was one of three evaluation criteria for the ESPIG proposal, the World

Bank generously funded a country's participation in the expensive PISA and PISA-D test. There were also more covert ways in which the World Bank supports OECD's agenda of preparing a twenty-first-century workforce. The Human Capital Index, produced annually by the World Bank, aims to estimate the future productivity of each country's workforce, by synchronizing available International Large-Scale Assessment (ILSA) and regional test program results. As we have shown in another study (Liu & Steiner-Khamsi, 2020), the score drops dramatically—due to a series of intra- and extrapolations—if a country does not regularly participate in international or regional large-scale student assessments.

Being a later adopter could be positive if there is lesson drawing from the experiences made in early adopter countries. The time lag with which the World Bank implemented SAA deserves theorizing regarding policy transfer. It means that the World Bank and the other multilateral agencies that supported the global script were exposed to the devastating critique of decentralization, school autonomy, and choice. As shown above, the World Bank learned and corrected its policies three times. Still, every time, millions of people in developing countries had to live with the consequences of policies that, in retrospect, were declared as failures.

## 4.2   One or More Global Scripts?

The move away from access and equal opportunity toward quality has not only been a trend in OECD countries but also in countries that are in the policy space of the Washington Consensus and OECD donor countries. The shift is also manifest in international agreements, as Mclean (2023) pointed out. According to his calculations, the word "quality" appears 11 times in the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on Education for All and is mentioned 178 times in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action. As mentioned previously, the quality of education is narrowly defined in terms of foundational learning (reading, writing, numeracy), and the testing of foundational learning. Fontdevila confirmed the trend toward the narrow definition of quality by showing that international funds made available for developing indicators and measures for the SDG target related to learning (SDG 4.1) exceeded by far all other targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (Fontdevila, 2023). All the organizations of the Big Five, including the World Bank and UNESCO, that in previous times used to hold opposing views (see Elfert & Ydesen, 2023), embraced over the last two decades the move to quality improvement and, more recently, toward learning and testing.

Based on a review of annual reports and project documents of the different types of donors, there is reason to suggest that SAWA or SAAA (including assessment) has been, by the end, supported by all multilateral donors that direct their policy advice and funds to school reform. It is also noticeable that the multilateral donors' instruments of global governance became increasingly similar, first governance by numbers and now governance by numbers 2.0 (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024c) which entails the use of digital platforms and other intermediaries that help spread their portfolio of best practices.

The field of international cooperation is soaked with organizations that use data to invoke crisis scenarios for which supposedly only they have a solution in store. By now, we all are numbed by meaningless statistics, reported in absolute numbers rather than in percentages, used to dramatize the great masses of out-of-school children, dropouts, or, more recently, in the aftermath of COVID-19, learning loss. Ingrained in its name, Education Cannot Wait, for example, has adopted the slogan, "Impatience as a Virtue"[9] and emulates UNICEF in its alarmist tone to position itself as the top expert for vulnerable children and youth, in particular for those in fragile and conflict-affected states. Expansive strategies are directly related to how organizations are funded. As Jones (1998, p. 151) has eloquently remarked, UNICEF's "analyses of needs tend to be dramatic, its projections tend to be alarmist, and its solutions tend to be populist" simply because the organization relies on voluntary donations from governments, private foundations, and individuals. In contrast, UNESCO competes with other UN agencies for funding, relying on government membership fees. For unrelated political reasons, it has been more successful in extracting fees from low-income governments than from high-income governments, such as the United States. Given the global scope of UNESCO's operation and its perpetual financial crisis, UNESCO relies on building alliances with governments and resourceful development agencies and is therefore anxious not to antagonize any of its members or partners. Even though chronically underfunded, UNESCO underpins its expansive strategy with its "convening power" (Burnett, 2019, p. 16); a power that should not be underestimated: "if UNESCO calls a meeting on something, ministers of education or senior official tend to show up" (Burnett, 2019, p. 16).

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[9] https://www.educationcannotwait.org

The bilateral donors such as the US (USAID), Germany, Japan, France, and the UK (only to list the five largest donors) have to cope with a difficult ordeal. On one hand the OECD DAC donor countries are part of the larger international donor community and pay their share to IGOs (World Bank, UNESCO, development banks) or voluntarily choose to allocate funds to multilateral organizations. Unless bilateral donors take a seat on the governing board of these IGOs, their impact on the reform priorities of multilateral organizations is limited. On the other hand, they are pressed by the taxpayers in their country to have visibility as a donor. For some bilateral donors, more than for others, visibility is key. USAID, for example, insists that their funding is made visible at every event and every knowledge product funded by USAID. The logo and the slogan "USAID From the American People" must be clearly visible. Similarly, Japan refrains from pooled funding because it renders the individual donors invisible. There are, of course, political considerations for such a directive. Let us not forget that many taxpayers in OECD countries wish to reduce financial commitments to poor countries because their perception of how much rich countries pay to poor countries is skewed. According to a survey,[10] Americans believe that 25 percent of the federal budget is allocated to poor countries and think that 10 percent should be sufficient. The estimate of what the US spends is completely off, but shows how politicized the issue of international development cooperation is. The US government's budget allocation for aid amounted to a meager 0.16 percent of its GNI in 2022, far below the internationally agreed target of 0.7 percent of the GNI.

It is important to bear in mind that donor governments both pay into a pool of multilateral aid (UN organizations, development banks, Education Cannot Wait, etc.) and have a budget allocated for their own bilateral development cooperation programs. Committing to narrowly fund foundational learning as part of their multilateral aid does therefore not preclude bilateral donors from pursuing their own reform priorities, some of which may be diametrically opposed to the reform priorities of their multilateral fund. For example, bilateral funding from Germany and Switzerland tends to focus on technical-vocational education for three

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[10] G. Ingram, Brookings Institution, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-every-american-should-know-about-u-s-foreign-aid/

reasons. They believe in the effectiveness of their own dual vocational-technical education system and therefore consider their involvement to constitute a comparative advantage vis-à-vis other donors. Then, related to the first point, bilateral donors attempt to identify a niche to avoid double funding of a project ("double dipping") by more than one donor. Finally, they anticipate a return on investment because implementing their projects requires expertise available in their own country, leading to the hiring of their nationals and the strengthening of their home institutions.

Thus, the processes of convergence and divergence occur concurrently in the Education Governing Complex because the two processes are inter-related and mutually reinforcing: the more donor governments agree on a joint international agenda (nowadays foundational learning and assessment), the more they try to differentiate themselves from other donors in their direct bilateral in-country contributions.

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# Time in Policy Transfer

Part II systematically explores seven temporal aspects of policy transfer: present, future, sequence, timing, lifespan, age, and tempo. Previously, I explained why the temporal dimension is relevant for policy studies (Chap. 1, Sect. 2.3). In Part II, I discuss the most common temporalities one by one. As before, I occasionally draw on the example of the global SAWA reform script.

Chapter 3 covers the first three temporalities—present, future, and sequence—that come to the fore with a macroscopic lens, one that draws attention to the global trends that facilitated the emergence of the global SAWA script. Shifting the level of analysis in Chap. 4, I recommend that we pursue a mesoscopic or institutional approach that brings into focus governments' selective reception and translation of the global script. Timing, lifespan, and age are the three temporalities that require, and, at the same time, help advance an institutional perspective on transfer processes. Finally, I make the case in Chap. 5 for a relational perspective that shows how global scripts change over time because of continual national adaptations on one hand, and vice versa, how the threshold for governments to adopt the script lowers with each educational system selectively borrowing, translating, and thereby blurring the original contours of the global script. The growing receptiveness to adopt a global script over time has repercussions for the tempo of diffusion. Once a critical mass of governments has adopted a traveling reform, the global script flies around the world with electronic speed, eventually reaching a point of saturation.

# The Evolution of a Global Script: The Present, Future, and Sequence of Reforms

The macro-level analysis, pursued in this chapter, elucidates the present (historical context), the future (pledges and promises), and the sequence of the public administration reforms that culminated in the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform. Such an undertaking begs for an examination of the historical context in which the contours of the global reform first emerged. What happened at the time when "autonomy" and, a few years later, "accountability" became popular reform ideas? Whereas this first research question enables us to identify discursive shifts that marked the start and end dates of the reform period, the following question deals with promissory futures: How did intergovernmental organizations manage to convince governments of SAWA as a universal solution that would also apply to their education system? Finally, how did the global script change over time from one that exclusively focused on autonomy to one that propelled autonomy with accountability? More specifically, what explains the sequence of the two reform waves?

## 1 The Present at the Time: The Historical Period of Worldwide Educational Expansion

The German term *Zeitgeist* beautifully captures the importance of the historical period during which reform movements or waves emerge. An intellectual terrain of sociologists, historical periodizations such as the era of

the welfare state, knowledge society, information society, etc., attempt to capture regional or global trends. Despite critical event analyses, the start and end dates of a historical period are not always easily discernible. Furthermore, countries experience different *Zeitgeists* depending on their broader geopolitical space. Taking the global perspective into account, the US period of affluence, for example, was the period of abject poverty and oppression in the colonized countries of the Global South. Thus, historical periodization is spatially bound and fluid in terms of the exact timespan.

In education policy studies, scholars came up with new terms, too, in order to capture new developments. The period preceding and leading up to the fundamental changes of the past fifty years is commonly known as the equal-opportunity period (1960s/1970s). It was during the era of the welfare state that governments had to cope with a (positive) problem: financing and managing the huge demand for education. The period of educational expansion started in the 1950s in advanced economies and, with the end of the colonial era, became a worldwide trend (Besche-Truthe, 2021; Meyer et al., 1977; Meyer et al., 1992; Murtin & Viarengo, 2011). Social groups that until then were discriminated against, treated as second-class citizens, and given limited access to education, notably women, linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities, individuals with special needs, as well as from low socio-economic family backgrounds, enrolled in great numbers. Former colonies and other dependent countries prioritized the education of the masses (known as "popular education" in Latin American countries) as a means of nation-building. Globally, educational attainment almost doubled in the last four decades of the last century. Over the period 1960–2000 alone, the average years of schools went up more than 70 percent (Gradstein et al., 2023). In 1960, youth and adults over the age of 15 years completed 3.7 years of school, whereas the same age group had completed 6.3 years of school in the year 2000 (Gradstein & Nikitin, 2004).

Of course, huge variations exist across the world regions. Garritzmann et al. (2022) draw on the data of Lee and Lee (2016) who combined several datasets to assess gross enrollments in 111 countries from 1820 to 2010. Every country in the world experienced a steady and, at times, explosive increase in enrollment apart from war-torn countries or oppressive regimes (e.g., Afghanistan). The Western economies or countries of the Global North, respectively, had more than 60 percent of the population enrolled in primary school by the mid-nineteenth century and more

than 90 percent by 1910. In stark contrast, the colonized countries of sub-Saharan Africa had in the early twentieth century less than 5 percent of their population enrolled in primary education. The vast disparities across world regions apply to all levels of education.

By now, all countries experienced both a horizontal and vertical educational expansion. Vertically, the increase in enrollment occurs at each subsequent level of education with a time lag, turning educational expansion into a *longue durée* phenomenon. Garritzmann et al. (2022) assert that the expansion of primary education is mainly "a story" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries while the demand for secondary school started much later. In Western economies or countries of the Global North, secondary school expansion picked up speed in the 1950s, generating, twenty years later, in the 1970s, explosive growth in higher education. Again, variations by world region are tremendous. Educational expansion in terms of educational attainment, the average length of schooling, is only half of the story. The other half relates to vertical expansion: an ever-growing number of individuals enrolled in school. Liberal beliefs in human rights, including the rights of women, disenfranchised groups and minorities, and children with special needs and disabilities, helped generate a demand for schooling. Since the nineteenth century, the vertical expansion followed a self-reinforcing pattern: the spread of the belief in the universal right to education created a demand for education, and vice-versa, the more educated people have become, the more they helped advocate for and advance liberal values, such as the universal right to education. However, due to the neoliberal world order, there seems to have been a backlash to liberal values. The pendulum has started to swing in non-liberal directions, as shown by Lerch, Bromley, and Meyer (2022).

As expected, the surge in enrollment led to a significant increase in the education budget. Gradstein et al. (2023) contend that public spending on education increased by 500 percent over the period of worldwide explosive educational expansion, that is, between 1960 and 2000. Not only did governments commit to improving access to education, thereby enabling more persons to take a seat in an educational institution, but the per student cost for securing the necessary support services and school infrastructure also soared. Mattei (2023) shows that public expenditure and taxation in advanced economies tended to rise more quickly than income as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP). The relative growth of the public sector, measured in terms of the change in public

expenditure as a proportion of GDP, was substantial and reached a peak of 44 percent by the mid-1990s. Countries could not keep up with the high level of public spending considering their large budget deficits. There is agreement that the financing but also the management of educational expansion constituted insurmountable challenges for governments worldwide.

Governments tried a variety of strategies to cope with the growing demand for education. The three most widespread ones were (i) decentralizing the management and financing of compulsory education, (ii) generously funding a few provinces, counties, or schools with the expectation that their exemplary high-quality education would spill over or transfer to the remaining public schools, and (iii) increasing revenue for the sector by charging tuition or collecting other types of fees from parents. A fourth strategy—cutting public expenditures by increasing efficiency and improving cost-effectiveness in public institutions—was first proposed by economists in business administration and then elevated into a full-fledged doctrine known as New Public Management.

Whereas governments applied the first three strategies pragmatically as short-term solutions to the financial and managerial challenges of coping with the great demand for education, the fourth one—NPM—became a long-term plan, one that led to an overhaul of the education system as it existed at the time. The fourth coping strategy was, however, not a short-term solution but a multi-year reform program. As I will demonstrate below, reference to the "future" is an important global governance tool for intergovernmental organizations. It explains why IOs keep formulating new international agreements every couple of years in collaboration with their member states and partners, even though past promises have invariably been broken. To better illustrate the four strategies, we may label them in ways that capture the essence of these different strategies, sometimes used in combination. The first one is a strategy of eating from separate pots; the second is funding a few at the expense of the masses; the third common approach was cost-sharing with parents, and the fourth one—doing more with less and doing it better—was eventually used as an argument for quasi-market regulation in education. The last one had the promise of making the money last longer and, at the same time, improving the quality of education. It was precisely that promise, or rather that theory of change, that spread globally and became the selling point for adopting the SAWA script.

### 1.1 Eating from Separate Pots: The Decentralization of Finance and Management

China's decentralization strategy is a good case in point. The government passed a nine-year compulsory education act in 1986 to meet the demand for skilled labor (National People's Congress, 1986). The central government was not in a position to finance educational expansion on its own. According to World Bank data, the government only spent 2 percent of GDP on education in 1985. That proportion doubled over the next three decades. A report from the central government shows that 2012 was the first year in which China's fiscal expenditure on education exceeded 4 percent of GDP (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2024). At the time of the Compulsory Education Act, it was neither financially nor administratively feasible for the central government to implement countrywide nine years of basic education on its own.

For this reason, the government launched a rigorous decentralization initiative under the slogan "eating from separate pots" (Gradstein et al., 2023, p. 225). Most provinces implemented this particular budget management system of "分灶吃饭" (*fen zao chi fan*) over the period 1980–1984. The counties, towns, and villages were the ones that assumed the responsibility for operating primary and lower secondary schools. The local governments were responsible for raising and managing their revenues and expenditures, including education funding. The budget for running compulsory education was almost exclusively secured from the financial sources at the provincial and county levels. Local enterprises and peasants were forced to remit surcharges to raise their local educational funds. In addition, parents paid small tuition fees, turning primary and lower secondary schools (referred to as junior high schools) into low-fee public schools. The central government closely supervised the provinces and counties' implementation of compulsory education by means of target-setting. While this policy helped mobilize local resources for education, it also contributed to regional disparities in resource allocation.[1]

It would be wrong to assume that the central government leaned back and delegated the rollout of compulsory education to the provinces and countries. On the contrary, in 1992, as is the case with other policy priorities, the government launched a campaign-style program to enforce

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[1] The input of two China experts and comparativists was invaluable for this section: on Ji Liu (Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an) and Haoyue Wang (Teachers College, Columbia University, New York).

the nationwide rollout of compulsory education within the next eight years (Liu et al., 2014). In the education sector, the four benchmarks included four indicators (see Fang et al., 2023): gross enrollment rates at primary level (100 percent) and junior high school level (95 percent), dropout rate (between 1 and 3 percent depending on school level and urban/rural areas), annual growth rate in terms of county-level public expenditures for education (minimum standards determined by the provincial government), and finally minimum standards reached for educational facilities and teachers' quality (determined by the provincial government). Centrally appointed inspectors rigorously supervised the implementation of the compulsory education law. Those counties that fulfilled all four benchmarks were awarded Certified Compulsory Education County (CCEC) status. The timing for inspection varied, depending on the financial resources of the province and county. Poorer locations were held accountable at a later point (the latest was 2001), and more resourceful counties had to demonstrate the achievement of the targets as soon as in the following year (1993). In addition, it provided incentives as well as sanctions for local government officials who did not make a sufficient effort to advance the implementation of compulsory education. More specifically, it applied a so-called "one-item veto" (*yi piao fou jue*) whereby provincial and county leaders would be disqualified for promotion regardless of how they performed in other policy domains. Fang et al. (2023) demonstrate convincingly how tying policy targets to individual career prospects led to window-dressing: Country-level education expenditures increased progressively as the inspection period drew near and then dropped dramatically after the inspection. Of course, holding government officials personally liable for policy implementation only functions due to China's integrated cadre personnel management system (Chan, 2022). Any functionary of the Chinese Communist Party is a cadre, regardless of how central or peripheral their role is in the system and where they are based in terms of locality. The strong integration of politics and administration ensures sweeping authority of the party on the one hand, while on the other hand, it affords administrators to move up the ranks provided that their superiors issue a positive evaluation of their work.

Nevertheless, the government's mix of policy instruments—funding pilot site for scaling innovations (translated as "from point to surface"), benchmarking and target-setting for each province, tying civil servants' career paths to the achievement of benchmarks, and strict monitoring—was successful. Enrollment in basic education skyrocketed. From 1994 to

2001, the educational expenditure at the county level more than doubled, and the average gross enrollment rate in junior high schools increased from approximately 74 percent to over 88 percent (Fang et al., 2023).

Like PR China, other countries experienced a growing inequality between regions, communities, and schools as a result of financial decentralization. Moreover, the inequalities tend to grow with each school level because the management and financing of educational expansion qualifies as a "long problem" (Hale, 2024). It spans several generations simply because educational expansion at one level of education leads, in a few years, to increased enrollment at the next level. For governments, a long time horizon is required to anticipate long-term planning and implementation needs. As with other countries, Kenya's educational expansion occurred first in primary schools, then in lower secondary schools, and a few years later at upper secondary schools. In the 1990s, the class sizes reached over 100 students in rural primary schools when school fees were abolished at the primary school level. To remedy the situation, Kenya's Ministry of Education resorted to hiring under-qualified teachers. A decade later, lower secondary schools in Kenya experienced similar challenges, including a shortage of teachers, textbooks, and classrooms. To remedy the situation, the Ministry of Education earmarked a budget in 2008 for the national secondary education expansion reform (SEE) (Brudevold-Newman, 2021). A great financial commitment was needed for such an expansion because running secondary schools is more costly than operating primary or pre-primary schools due to the higher salaries of teachers, smaller class sizes, and the equipment and laboratories required in several school subjects.

Kenya's pathway of educational expansion is not out of the ordinary. According to UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report, 83 percent of the 146 countries included in the analysis had to shorten the instructional hours and hire untrained teaching staff in 2012 (UNESCO GEMR, 2015, p. 187) to reduce the large class sizes. As was the case in Kenya, the challenges associated with rapid expansion at the primary level were catapulted to the next, lower secondary school level. The abolition of school fees in lower secondary schools, as targeted in the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, has not only led to a surge of enrollment in secondary schools but also mitigated the grave issue of dropouts in the upper grades of primary schools. Time will tell whether the same sequence of reforms will be pursued at the secondary school level: decentralization and school autonomy, followed by measures to mitigate inequality and improve the quality in

resource-poor secondary schools. Once access to upper secondary school has improved, the pressure for greater enrollment is likely to occur at the tertiary level if variations in birth rates and employment opportunities are not considered. The domino effect of educational expansion—expansion at one level leads in a few years to expansion at the next level—explains why many countries in the Global South currently experience rapid educational expansion at the tertiary level. In addition, the trend toward "overeducation" is partly due to the privatization of higher education. Private colleges and universities lowered their entry requirement to increase their revenue from tuition fees, leading to the phenomenon of "overeducation" discussed in the literature forty years ago (Tsang & Levin, 1985). For these governments, the question is whether they should bolster technical-vocational education as a more viable pathway to employment than going to university.

## 1.2  Funding a Few at the Expense of the Masses: The Establishment of Centers of Excellence

Another government strategy to cope with the great demand for good quality education is to fund a few schools that function as centers of excellence, or exemplars of emulation, for the surrounding, poorly performing schools. Positively framed, learning from the best is the idea behind selective funding. Negatively framed, this approach benefits a few at the expense of the masses. By design, a group of select schools receives ample training, resources, and mentorship with the expectation that they become centers of excellence. The low-performing schools, in turn, are expected to emulate the pedagogical practices and use the teaching and learning material developed at these excellent schools.

Governments, NGOs, and donors have tried that strategy for diffusing innovation and improving the quality of education during a period marked by educational expansion yet constrained resources. The idea of a pyramid, cascade, or hub of innovation sounds better than the actual reality. It did not take long for resourceful parents to enroll their children in these centers of excellence turning them in effect into elite schools. In the same vein, these schools became magnets for qualified teachers. As a result, the pedagogical practices were not transferrable to regular public schools either because the "best practices" were tied to the extra funding or because these schools attracted high-performing students and teachers.

Despite the limited transfer of innovation to regular public schools, the model has been tried worldwide, as the following examples show.

PR China introduced a pyramid model in 1976 to grapple with the low quality of education accompanying the rapid expansion of primary schooling (Wang & Yang, 2021). The innovation was supposed to trickle down from a few experimentation sites to the rest of the schools in the country. The masses of primary schools were supposed to learn from these specially designated centers of excellence that received extra funding and support from the government. China's "experimentation under hierarchy" (Heilmann, 2008) has been an object of intense study in public policy studies, dating back to the communist revolution of the 1940s for the sequenced implementation of land reform in selected regions to build a foundation for the new regime (Wang & Yang, 2021). It was revitalized in the 1980s as an innovation modality in which the government first tries out a reform at the county and province level before scaling successful pilot programs countrywide. This enables the government to evaluate a policy, avoid mistakes, and plan better. The central government directly assigns certain provinces as sites for policy experimentation. The province government officials, in turn, identify counties that they either appoint directly or have expressed a willingness to participate. The innovation such as new curriculum standards, new teaching methods, or new textbooks, is then implemented in these so-called "experimental zones" (*shiyanqu*). Based on the evaluation results, the central government determines whether these sites should be used as demonstration zones (*shifanqu*) for other counties and provinces, setting in motion the process that is referred to as "from point to surface" (Wang & Yang, 2021, p. 7). Regular schools are then expected to study, learn from, and borrow the innovative practices tried in the experimental zones. China's experimentation modality has gained traction in recent years because of the rising interest in understanding how innovations may be scaled up.

In PR China and elsewhere, a recurrent criticism of this modality is the bias involved with selecting pilot or experimental sites, hampering subsequent rollout. Typically, resourceful and innovation-minded counties, municipalities, or schools are selected that can demonstrate not only their willingness but also their capacity to test innovation successfully. Wang and Yang (2021) analyzed 142,116 "policy experimentations" in several ministries over the period 1980–2020. They disaggregated the policy experimentation zones by thirteen policy domains (resource, energy and environment, market supervision, agriculture, education, finance, tax and

fiscal policy, etc.) and calculated the frequency of experimentation, number of sites, subsequent roll out at provincial or national level, and representativeness of the experimental sites in terms of economic factors. Compared to other policy domains, the education sector ranks above average in terms of policy experimentation. The most experimental-friendly policy domains are the ones related to resources, energy, and the environment. At the other end of the spectrum is the transportation sector; it has the smallest number of policy experimentations. From the innovations tested in the education sector, slightly less than half (47 percent) were subsequently scaled up, and the selected experimentation sites and schools were not a representative sample of their county or province. Three-quarters of the sites and schools (74 percent) were above average in terms of income level. The government continues to use this modality for "uplifting" low performing schools and universities to the standards achieved in the best-performing education institutions. In fact, the provinces that the Government of China selected for participation in the last few OECD's PISA rounds have, until now, always been well-established experimentation zones known for their high performance and favorable wealth composition. The government selected the municipality of Shanghai to participate in PISA starting in 2009. Other provinces included Beijing, Jiangsu, and Guangdong (PISA 2015). Guangdong was subsequently dropped and replaced with Zhejiang, a rich coastal province near Shanghai. In the last two rounds of PISA (2018 and 2022), four provinces participated on behalf of the entire country: Shanghai, Beijing, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang. Even before PISA, the governments selected these municipalities and provinces as centers of excellence. They are among the best-performing school systems worldwide yet hardly representative of schools in PR China (Gruijters, 2020).

Countries in the Global South also implemented the strategy with funding from international donors, albeit not for improving access but rather for improving the quality of education. Like other former communist countries, Mongolia committed to universal access to education and healthcare already in the 1960s. A signpost of progress, rapid educational expansion was made possible because of the financial support from the Soviet Union and the communist Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). By the time the communist regime was ousted in the early 1990s, Mongolia already had universal primary as well as near-to-universal secondary school completion in place (until grade 10), like those in advanced economies. Incidentally, this was at about the same time when,

with the Education for All agreement in 1990, the international community agreed to channel funds into achieving universal access to primary schools in countries of the Global South. Former communist countries achieved the targets above and far beyond the international benchmarks set in 1990. The thematic priorities of the 1990 international EFA agreement, including the focus on girls' education (women outperformed men in former communist countries), did not apply to the thirty plus post-socialist countries, even though having slipped from a Second to Third World country status, they qualified for international development assistance. In urgent need to receive international external finance once the influx of Soviet and CMEA funding ended, the governments in the post-socialist region agreed to use the funding to improve the quality of education. Given the limited funds made available, they used the strategy of funding a few pilot, project, or partner schools with the expectation that innovation would be transferred from these participating schools to the large number of non-participating schools in the country.

The cascade model of innovation, whereby innovation is supposed to flow or rather trickle down from elite public schools, or hubs of excellence, to regular public schools, has sailed under different names. In Cambodia, these publicly funded schools are labeled New Generation Schools. Similarly, the Government of Angola applied the modality to establish so-called "reference schools" that help "modernize" (Government of Angola, 2022, p. 27) all secondary schools in terms of science, technology, and mathematics education. The project "Escolas de Referência e do Sistema Nacional de Garantia do Qualidade no Ensino Superior" is part of the government's national development plan 2023–2027.

In the new millennium, several governments established hubs of innovation to advance public–private partnerships. Concretely, the public sector enlists private actors to inject the system with all kinds of innovations, ranging from student-centered learning to English as a language of instruction. Whereas the pedagogical innovations in countries of the Global South have been mostly funded by NGOs (e.g., Soros Foundation Network partner schools for critical thinking, debate), governments have used public funds to "internationalize" a few schools with the expectations that the innovations at these centers of excellence will spill over to all public schools. Well-documented cases are the International Baccalaureate schools in Ecuador (Resnik, 2014), Spanish-speaking countries (Resnik, 2016), the United States (Resnik, 2015), and Japan (Iwabuchi, 2022), the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools in Kazakhstan (Kurakbayev, 2023), and

the International Standards Schools in Indonesia (ACDP, 2013). The cost of these public–private partnerships has been excessive, hampering the replicability of this modality. Unsurprisingly, the governments were heavily criticized for using public funds to establish schools for the elite, depriving the masses of much-needed funding for their schools (Steiner-Khamsi & Dugonjic-Rodwin, 2018).

### 1.3    Cost-Sharing with Parents: Low-Fee Schools and the Rise of Business Interest in Education

The third strategy to manage and fund growing enrollments was to share the financial burden with parents and communities. The governments pursued different models, depending on whether they actively encouraged non-state actors (non-governmental organizations, churches, associations, businesses) to run schools and whether they allowed them to operate their schools for profit. The main government-sponsored models, differentiated by type of provider (public versus private) and by financial gains (non-profit, for-profit), are low-fee public schools, community schools, and low-fee private schools. All these models have controversial issues embedded in them.

**Low-Fee Public Schools**  This modality is more common than assumed. Starting with the compulsory school law (1986), PR China allowed schools to charge small fees for tuition and incidental expenses (学杂费), such as for textbooks, exam fees, and uniform costs, from parents. In many countries, it is not out of the ordinary that governments expect parents to financially support schools. For example, in rural schools of post-socialist Central Asia and Mongolia, parents are expected to contribute to school repair and maintenance either financially or with their own labor. Overall, the schemes were successful in that they allowed counties to open new schools and offer more seats to students. However, in some counties more than others and in some schools more than others, additional funds were accumulated, leading to great disparity. The sore point here is the long list of non-official fees that parents are expected to shoulder for the education of their children. Even in countries that by law guarantee free education, parents pay for textbooks, uniforms, after-school programs, private tutoring, and, in some countries, for gifts and other kinds of bribes for teachers and school principals.

**Community Schools** Community schools are widespread in rural and urban slum areas across countries of the Global South. Typically confined to the primary and pre-primary levels, communities initiate establishing such one to two-room multigrade schools because there is no educational institution in the vicinity. Oftentimes, they build low-cost school facilities with their own labor, hire a school manager and teachers from the community (many of them untrained and underpaid), charge a small tuition fee from parents, and establish a board or a parents' association to oversee the operation of the school. Some communities, more than others, managed to mobilize funds from churches (e.g., Catholic secondary schools in Mozambique), non-governmental organizations (e.g., Save the Children community-school projects in Mali), foundations (e.g., Step by Step kindergarten funded by the Soros Foundation Network), of bilateral and multilateral donors (e.g., girls education projects in Afghanistan). For various reasons, international donors advocated for community schools as a viable model to advance Education for All. USAID,[2] SDC,[3] DANIDA,[4] for example, saw these community initiatives along with other types of parental involvement as signposts of civil-society involvement or, even more so, as a cornerstone of democratic political systems worth supporting (Burde, 2004). The World Bank liked the cost-saving feature and the school-based accountability mechanism put in motion by those who cared most about the smooth operation of the school: the parents and the community. In El Salvador, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development funded EDUCO (acronym translated as Education with Community Participation) primarily because of the community-based management and demand-side accountability features, that is, active participation of the community in the management of the school (Edwards

[2] USAID supported Save the Children's community school programs and more general parents-teacher associations, framing them as civil society participation (Burde, 2004). Starting in the 1990s after the fall of communism, they considered the increase in the number of newly established NGOs as an indicator for the democratization of society.

[3] The preferred model of aid, pursued by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, has been direct collaboration with local governments and communities, reiterated all three years in the International Cooperation Strategies of the Swiss Federal Council, including in the most recent strategy of 2025–2028. See https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/iza-strategie-2025-28.html

[4] DANIDA supported in Mongolia schools that expanded their services for the entire community (including cultural center), had school development plans, and school boards in place. Their follow-up project entailed civil society or NGO strengthening in the education sector.

Jr., 2018; Edwards Jr. & DeMatthews, 2014). Subsequently, the World Bank also supported the transfer of EDUCO to other countries in Latin America, adapted and relabeled in 1995 as PRONADE (Programa Nacional de Autogestión para el Desarrollo Educativo) in Guatemala and in 1999 as PROHECO (Proyecto Hondureño de Educación Comunitaria) in Honduras (Meza et al., 2004). For a while, non-profit community schools were hyped as the panacea for achieving education for all, alleviating poverty, and combating illiteracy with the support of communities and non-governmental organizations (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Perhaps best known for its effective yet fair cost-sharing arrangement with parents to propel universal access to education are the experiences in Bangladesh. The World Bank identified Bangladesh to be "on track" with achieving universal primary completion owing to the wide variety of primary schools, in particular, a large number of community schools and BRAC non-formal education schools (Bruns et al., 2003). In Bangladesh, there are parallel school systems in place, each governed and funded from different sources: low-fee religious madrasahs, low-fee secular community schools, governmental schools, NGO-run schools, and BRAC schools. Bangladesh lends itself to tracing how the community-school model tends to metamorphose from community-financed to donor-financed and eventually to government-financed schools. The trend to convert them into public schools or to use the term used in Bangladesh to "nationalize" them is clearly discernible. Dating back to the 1970s, the community schools in Bangladesh faced two challenges: since they were not registered, their students could not easily transfer into regular public school after fifth grade upon graduation from primary school, and their teachers had no job security and a small salary.

Even though the Government of Bangladesh actively promoted the establishment of community primary schools for the past fifty years, they minimally supported them financially. Starting in 2013, however, the Government of Bangladesh initiated the nationalization of community primary schools in order to upgrade their status and improve teachers' pay. The process is slow, and the quest for nationalizing private schools continues, leading periodically to political unrest, including teacher hunger strikes. In 2023, several teachers' associations established the Private Education Nationalization Liaison Forum, which demands the government to nationalize private schools in order to pay community

schoolteachers (both the secular community schools and the madrasah teachers) the same salary and benefits as public school teachers.[5]

Along with the community-led schools, BRAC (Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee) caters to the large number of out-of-school children who either did not enroll or dropped out of school. BRAC was established in 1972, shortly after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan. The initial target group was 8–14-year-olds. The large number of children and youth enrolled in BRAC schools created revenue-generation opportunities. The benefits were then reinvested in social and educational programs. An object of great fascination is how BRAC used the economy of scale to build social enterprises (Aarong, Aaroung Dairy, BRAC Seed and Agro, etc.) and commercial entities (BRAC bank, BRACnet, etc.) that benefit the poor. Over time, BRAC added more levels and types of educative sites, comprising by now pre-primary, primary, secondary, community learning centers, education in emergency programs (Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh), and university. The BRAC non-formal education schools also evolved over time from low-cost to low-fee non-profit, and possibly soon, to low-fee for-profit private schools. BRAC recruits mostly female teachers from the community and provides an initial two-week practice-based training followed by ongoing refresher courses throughout the school year.

BRAC prioritizes accountability by having its officers and volunteers visit each school at least once a month and supporting school-based parent-teacher committees to monitor the school's daily activities. The controversial issue here is the move from low-cost to low-fee schools. Once international donors reduced or ceased funding, BRAC started to charge tuition fees and solicited the help of government offices to collect them more effectively (Richardson, 2018; see Khan, 2003). In 2012, the NGO piloted a new model of low-fee private primary schools *Shishu Niketon* (Richardson, 2018), and twelve years later, BRAC communicated its plan to develop, in collaboration with the largest global education company Pearson and the controversial school chain Bridge International

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[5] See https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/0cl455yb66
https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/education/135563/private-school-teachers-start-hunger-strike-for

Academy,[6] a "business plan" that would allow them to scale up their model at the secondary school level.[7]

All in all, community schools have traditionally been widespread in countries of the Global South. In the 1980s and 1990s, they were seen as being closer to the people and were actively supported by international non-governmental organizations and grassroots organizations (e.g., Yumba et al., 2018). Later on, as part of the plan to strengthen demand-side accountability, decentralization of finance and management, and active participation of parents and community members in the governance of the school, the development banks and several bilateral donors funded and promoted community schools.

**For-Profit, Low-Fee Private Schools** Low-fee private schools have existed for a long time in countries of the Global South and constitute, in some regions, the bulk of primary schools (Härmä, 2021; Srivastava, 2013; Tooley, 2013; Walford, 2023). They are established and owned by businesses. In the new millennium, the commercialization of these schools in the form of money-making school chains has turned them into a heatedly debated issue. "Low fee" means, according to Tooley, a maximum of USD 1.25 per day or, according to Härmä (2021), 10 percent or less of a household's monthly income. The school chain Bridge International Academy charges a school fee of only USD 6.60 a month. Yet, additional school expenses accrue to a monthly average cost of USD 20 per month (Education International & Kenya National Union of Teachers, 2016). What is more, affordability is, in the end, a matter of how many children a household chooses to enroll in private schools. The fees also vary by level of education. A study of fourteen rural secondary schools in Bangladesh, carried out by the NGO Education and Cultural Society, found that families from poor households have difficulties meeting the fee obligation in low-fee private schools (Morris & Nóra, 2024, p. 148).

As a result of the trend toward privatization and public–private partnerships, many governments relaxed the accreditation requirements for private providers and, in some countries, deregulated the education market

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[6] https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/28452:exposed-collusion-and-cover-up-a-world-bank-and-bridge-international-academies-scandal

[7] https://innovation.brac.net/blog/increasing-bracs-value-creation-at-the-secondary-school-level-in-bangladesh/

entirely. For example, the municipal government of Rawalpindi, Pakistan, stopped registering low-fee private schools a few years ago. The education authorities lost the oversight of how many such schools exist either because they are established on private property—sometimes in the back of a shop or on the upper floor of a residential building—or simply because the authorities chose to turn a blind eye on these education businesses. In Pakistan, the proliferation of low-fee private schools is by government design: The 2009 National Education Plan, issued by the Ministry of Education, called for entrepreneurs to open schools in areas with either no schools or only non-functioning public schools. The plan acknowledged that the government alone does not have the capacity nor the funds to ensure universal access to education. The government also promoted the use of vouchers, funded by philanthropies and donors, to incentivize businesses to open and operate schools. According to Bajwa (2024), the close collaboration with the private sector has been institutionalized a decade later. The 2017 National Education Plan of Pakistan sees the private sector as an indispensable partner and, in fact, has set targets to actively propel the expansion of the education industry: The goal is to establish an additional 30,000 low-fee private schools by school year 2025/2026 with an estimated enrollment of 3.6 million children.

The eagerness to promote privatization through public–private partnerships, in which governments—often with support from foundations or international donors—minimize risks and maximize profits for businesses, including financial returns on investments, have lured both companies and investors into the sector. The largest chains of low-fee private schools are Bridge International Academies, with schools in India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, and the Rising Academy Network, with 700 schools in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Rwanda, enrolling 250,000 students.[8] Other private school chains, such as GEMS[9] have joined the marketplace and diversified their programs by offering "first class, second class, and third class" options for parents, depending on how much they can afford (Ridge et al., 2016). GEMS' expensive first-class programs in the United Arab Emirates, for example, include instruction by native English teachers and access to all school facilities (including physical education facilities) and

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[8] https://www.risingacademies.com/

[9] Sunny Varkey founded the GEMS school chain. Forbes included him in the list of billionaires in 2024, with a net worth of USD 3.3 billion. Source: https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/

after-school programs. In contrast, the cheap third-class programs limit the use of facilities and students are taught by non-native teachers from surrounding countries and from South Asia. Similarly, the number of development impact funds in the education sector has proliferated over the past few years. A good example is the Education Outcomes Fund,[10] managed by the UBS Optimus Foundation (associated with a Swiss bank) with funding from high-net-worth individuals, governments (Korea, UK, Switzerland), and philanthropies (Omidyar Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Lego Foundation, Ford Foundation, Altassian, Dubai Cares, and others).

The commercialization of low-fee private schools has been plagued by scandals. In 2016, the Government of Uganda closed sixty-three schools of the Bridge International Academy due to their low quality.[11] The Partnership Schools for Liberia program, an initiative of the Government of Liberia to promote public–private partnership program, came under attack for its irregular procurement and contractual arrangements with providers. Most recently, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were criticized for financing the spread of Bridge International Academy school even though the children in these schools were reported to be sexually abused, the quality of education was sub-standard, and workers were exploited at the school. Several human rights advocacy groups joined forces to warn against the disastrous effects of deregulation, culminating in 2019 in the international agreement "*Abidjan Principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education,*" signed by numerous associations (Adamson et al., 2021). Following an unfavorable report of the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group, the International Finance Corporation (World Bank's private sector arm) finally agreed on June 8, 2022, to discontinue funding for-profit low-fee primary and secondary schools.[12]

At first, the huge demand for schooling and parents' willingness to pay for their children's education was abused by many, including by governments. In many countries, such as Pakistan, the government acknowledged the state's failure to provide free, universal, and good-quality education and incentivized companies to enter the sector. Of course,

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[10] https://www.educationoutcomesfund.org/faqs

[11] https://www.educationoutcomesfund.org/faqs

[12] https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2022/07/world-banks-ifc-ends-funding-for-fee-paying-primary-and-secondary-schools/

businesses were quick to discover the financial benefits of educational expansion. No other sector, except for health, inherently constitutes an economy of scale. Similar to the health sector, where each individual over the course of a lifespan accesses health services (if they are available) multiple times, everyone would want to benefit from education programs (i) not only once but recurrently or multiple times over the lifespan, (ii) in multiple educative sites (including the workplace), and (iii) in terms of compulsory schooling over a long, uninterrupted time period.

John Fallon, CEO of Pearson, explained in 2015 why the company sold the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* to invest in a burgeoning, more lucrative business: the education sector.

> Parents in countries around the world, rich and poor, the single thing that matters to them most is equipping their kids with the skills and the knowledge to go to university, to learn English as a foreign language, because that's what's going to get them a better job and a better start in life and that's what we're lining Pearson up to and it's a huge opportunity for us. (Fallon, 2015)

It is important to remember that governments have a choice in adopting or rejecting certain types of cost-sharing arrangements. The upsurge of low-fee private schools at the expense of low-fee public schools and non-profit community schools, described above, is remarkable. The explosive growth of for-profit private schools is fueled by businesses' insatiable appetite for reaping the benefits of the sector's economy of scale. Conservative parties that believe in the salutary effects of privatization and the deregulation of the public sector have backed their conquest of the sector.

### 1.4   Doing More with Less and Doing It Better: Efficiency and Achievement Gains by Reforming Management

None of the three government strategies to fund educational expansion—eating from separate pots, funding a few at the expense of the masses, and cost-sharing with parents—took on the stature of a global script. What is more, the rapid pace of educational expansion, made possible with the three strategies, had the same negative side-effect: a deterioration of the quality of education. Teacher, textbook, and infrastructure supply lagged behind the ever-growing demand for schooling, first at the primary level, then at all other levels of education, from pre-primary to tertiary

education. The low-quality ordeal affected particularly disadvantaged school districts and residential areas, giving rise to equity concerns. Thus, the reform sequence—first improving access, then improving quality and equity—is symptomatic of rapid educational expansion under restricted managerial and financial resources.

In contrast, what did rise to a global reform package was the neoliberal script of deregulation or quasi-market regulation. The script promised to increase the quality of education while simultaneously lowering the cost of education simply because schools were put in a position to compete over students or—to flesh out the neoliberal mindset—to attract customers in a marketplace where parents are given the option to select the school of their choice for their children. Anathema was inequity; the neoliberal script not only neglected but, in fact, exacerbated unequal educational development.

Proponents of the fourth neoliberal strategy argued that the cost of education is artificially held high by a state apparatus that uses employment in the public sector as a social safety net. Governments could rely on fewer, cheaper, and more hardworking employees, count on better services, and witness a higher quality of education if they stopped overregulating the public sector and incentivized competitors (the private sector) to provide public services. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, p. 28) stated that the efficiency-gains cutback approach that "savings can be made without too much pain" appealed to many. The managerial rhetoric was commonsensical, crossing party and other ideological lines. Milton Friedman, the most outspoken proponent of voucher schemes, calculated that the true or competitive price for per-student spending would be half if public schools were forced to compete with private schools. Carnoy provided the estimate based on the voucher scheme that Friedman designed for the political propositions in the state of California in 1993 and again in 2000 (see Carnoy, 2024). What is more, the assumption was that competition would improve student achievement if market accountability were rigorously implemented. Schools will improve their program if they know that parents could easily withdraw their children and enroll them in a better-performing school.

Different from the three pragmatic government strategies described above, the strategy of quasi-market regulation had an ideological underpinning that resonated with conservative parties that were in power at the time. According to their ideology, the social welfare state, along with its large administrative apparatus, will become superfluous if it invests instead

in policies that support prosperity for all. The metaphor of "all boats rising" was used to justify why deregulating and incentivizing the private sector benefits everyone, not just the company owners and shareholders (Beckert, 2020). Businesses would create jobs, enable social mobility, and broaden the middle class. For conservative parties, the best state is the small state, a state that does not interfere with principles of market regulation. Demand and supply considerations, characteristic of market regulation, should also inform the public sector. As a corollary, competition between producers will invariably reduce the cost and, at the same time, improve the quality of the product. In the education sector, the producers operate schools, and the product is education. Thus, the fourth strategy to deal with educational expansion—financially and managerially—was to reduce or eliminate state regulation and incentivize non-state actors to provide goods and services for the public sector, including running schools. Greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness were the two selling points of market regulation. The argument was made that with the same, or even with a smaller state budget, more or even better services could be provided for education for all.

## 2   The Future: Disciplining and Signaling with Target-Setting

Educational expansion is an example of a "long problem" *par excellence*. Similar to climate change (Hale, 2024), governments need to plan far ahead and have a long time horizon in mind. The issue is not solvable within a short time period and, in fact, unfolds over several generations. This creates a challenge for institutional memory and organizational learning. Similar to the models discussed by climate change experts, a substantial rise in temperatures over the next few decades is likely even if carbon emissions would cease tomorrow. The increase takes place because it already is "in the pipeline"—stored in the ocean, from which it will gradually be released into the atmosphere (Pierson, 2004, p. 80). For Pierson, global warming illustrates the issue with long problems: the causal process (increasing emissions) and the outcome (temperature rise) are long-term. Using a 2 × 2 matrix, juxtaposing the duration of the time horizon of the cause with the time horizon of the outcome, Pierson identifies tornados at the opposite end of global warming: both the time horizon or duration for a tornado to develop is short, and the outcome is immediate. Educational

expansion is comparable with global warming in that the causes (nation-building in the post-colonial period, the right to education movement, the 1994 Salamanca Agreement, etc.) date back a long time ago, placing entire nations as well as individuals "in the pipeline" for a long-term outcome: continuous educational expansion.

As I will show, the long future-oriented temporal frame of ongoing educational expansion resonates with international agreements as well as with the new policy tool of target-setting.

### 2.1    Renewable Promises for a Long Problem

"Promises, promises" were what the fourth strategy for coping with educational expansion, explained above, built on (see Robertson & Beech, 2023). Different from the first three pragmatic approaches that yielded immediate results, the fourth neoliberal strategy entailed a long-term plan: an overhaul of the education system as we knew it. Whether it worked or not was a matter of assessment in a distant future. It was a plan that entailed a new way of thinking, that is, a different policy goal (deregulation/autonomy instead of redistribution/equal opportunity), a different set of education policies, and new policy instruments (notably, contractual arrangements between the state and non-state entities). In return for trusting the assumptions underlying the long-term plan, promises were made about the miraculous anticipatory effects of quasi-market regulation.

Unsurprisingly, old solutions (e.g., community involvement) to the same problem (lack of financial and managerial capacity) present themselves as new solutions (nowadays labeled social accountability). What is more, educational expansion continues in most countries, moving up in age cohorts and across educative sites (formal education, professional development at the workplace, certificate programs, etc.). In countries of the Global South, educational expansion was first felt at the primary level in the 1990s, at the secondary level in the 2000s, and at the tertiary level in the 2010s. In addition, the number of educative sites multiplied because of lifelong learning. This is not to suggest that educational expansion moved up everywhere to the higher levels of education. In contrast to advanced economies where demographic decline triggered educational contraction, manifested in smaller class sizes and closure of schools, many other countries continue to experience educational expansion, reflected in the number of new teachers and schools needed yearly. Finally, SDG 4 also commits to expanding compulsory schooling to include pre-primary and

lower-secondary school levels, thereby creating new challenges for financing and managing compulsory education. Thus, the promises to come to grips with the issue of educational expansion are doomed to fail and, therefore, lend themselves to renewal.

Strassheim (2016) reminds us that uncovering the time dimension in policymaking shows us how power, rationality, and collectivity are interrelated. For example, presenting a problem as an issue that requires immediate attention by everyone provides political legitimacy to transfer "solutions" proposed by international organizations. It is a political strategy that uses the time factor for coalition building and garnering public support. Intergovernmental organizations, with their alarmist rhetoric (e.g., "millions of young people are neither in school nor in employment") and their constant recourse to a fixed time horizon determined by international agreements (EFA 2000, MDGs 2015, SDGs 2030), are masters of Governance by Time. The search for best practices, or formulated differently, for universal solutions to national problems, leads to "temporal sorting" (Strassheim, 2016, p. 156): the search for a problem for an already available solution.

Neoliberalism implied a theory of change that would only materialize in the future if the plan were correctly implemented. It promised to reduce public expenditures and improve the quality of education. Governments should learn efficient management from businesses, a view that was actively promoted by the OECD's influential Public Management Committee (PUMA), established in 1990 (see OECD, 1993a; Pal, 2012), and the UN Public Administration Network (UNPAN). Even though the savings from efficiency gains would show immediately, the long-term quality improvement benefits would only materialize in the future.

The role of intergovernmental organizations, notably the OECD and the World Bank, in fabricating a coherent neoliberal theory of change, assembling a policy framework with concrete action plans, and then, a few years later, continuously monitoring and steering national governments toward a clearly defined, joint future should not be underestimated.

Along with conceptual work, they developed guidebooks, "working papers" (World Bank), "occasional papers" (OECD), case studies of successful public management reforms, and numerous templates and checklists (e.g., OECD 1993b, 1995). Landahl (2020) highlights the disciplinary function of the recurrent PISA tests. It is a form of "temporal governance" in which governments are measured in terms of what they have accomplished toward the long-term goal of transforming their education system

into one that focuses on twenty-first-century skills, defined and advanced by the OECD. Narrative analyses, such as Auld and Morris' succinct investigation of how the OECD explains why international large-scale assessments, such as PISA, contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, are ideally suited to understand the impact of prophecies made by the OECD but also other international organizations (Auld & Morris, 2021). The messianic appeal becomes instantly apparent when the fabricated stories deal with issues that are complex and not solvable in the short run.

Scholars of political science and international relations use the term "promissory legitimacy" (Beckert, 2020) or "anticipatory global governance" (Berten & Kranke, 2022) to describe the source of authorization that global actors rely on to be heard and listened to both by their constituents (governments) and by other international organizations. Since international organizations compete over discursive power, global standard-setting, and impact on national governments, it is more appropriate to use the plural when referring to the future. The "combination of numbers and futures" (Berten & Kranke, 2022, p. 599) can upset the temporal order implied in the policy process: the solutions are projected into the future by ways of global benchmarking and strategic planning. All that needs to be done is to retroactively reframe local challenges in terms of the available global solutions. International organizations not only legitimize reform ideas and thereby help disseminate them globally (Dobbin et al., 2007), but their global governance mechanism of benchmarking generates a sense of urgency which, in effect, accelerates the adoption of international standards and global reforms. In short, international organizations both certify and accelerate the worldwide dissemination of particular reforms. The inverse also applies: by opposing certain reform models, they, in effect, de-certify and slow down their dissemination to a point where global uptake is unlikely to occur. The example of nomadic education, discussed later, is an example of a reform that did not go global given the resistance of global actors.

The international convergence of school reforms results from conditionalities imposed on or adopted by national governments, respectively. Therefore, foresight and promissory futures as a global governance mechanism relies on formulating jointly agreed conditions that need to be met. A trusted ally of governments, UNESCO plays a crucial role in ensuring such a buy-in from governments at a time when international agreements, future-oriented plans, and multi-year agendas are established. The

conditions themselves, however, are not enforced by UNESCO but rather by the OECD and the World Bank, respectively. The influence of the first two neoliberal movers—the OECD by means of harmonization among its member states and advice to non-member governments (OECD, 1995) and the World Bank by means of financial incentives in lower-income, non-OECD countries—may not be overstated.

In general, global actors derive their own legitimacy from defining what that future should entail and continuously and excessively monitor governments whether they really move toward international agreements (EFA, MDGs, SDGs, etc.) and broadly defined "international standards," "best practices," or, to use the newest term, "global common practice." The conditions that must be met for the predicted outcomes to materialize are often linked to organizational goals and targets. An example of how international organizations tie their promissory future to programmatic conditionalities is the 2024 Spotlight Report on basic education completion and foundational learning in Africa (UNESCO GEMR, 2023). The public announcement of the report launch reads:

> The 2024 Spotlight continental report examines mathematics curricula, textbooks, teacher guides, and learning assessments: how the different documents align with each other, *with appropriate pedagogy*, and *with global common practice*. (UNESCO GEMR, 2023; italics by author).

The promissory future of basic education completion will only arrive if, and only if, countries adopt the "appropriate pedagogy" and the "global common practice" defined by the Foundational Learning Compact (FLC). FLC's claim to universal knowledge and scientific authority is implied and not to be overheard.

Observing the future as an important temporality of transfer challenges our linear and chronological understanding of time. Berten and Kranke (2022) urge us to broaden the chronological notion of time (from past to present, from present to future) by acknowledging that time is socially constructed when it comes to anticipating the future. The constructivist notion of time has been discussed by sociologists, including Niklas Luhmann (1997), for a while and has been revived in the social sciences (Beckert, 2020; Berten & Kranke, 2022) and educational research over the past few years (Robertson, 2022; Hansen et al., 2021). According to Berten and Kranke (2022, p. 158), anticipatory practices or bringing "the future into the present" have great repercussions for governance. First,

constructing so-called "present futures" (Luhmann, 1997, p. 140) helps mitigate the sense of paralyzing insecurity and turns insecurity into tangible risks. Governments, in turn, garner legitimacy for their policy decisions by framing their actions as anticipatory measures of risk reduction. Second, it shifts power relations in the direction of those that define the future (IOs) and reduces the role of governments to serve as implementation agencies for international plans. Finally, the promissory approach of governance softens the controversies around unpopular policies as they are reframed as transitory measures in preparation for a brighter, better future.

Without any doubt, the OECD and the World Bank Group were the first and largest global actors promoting market regulation and privatization. However, aspects of the neoliberal reform package greatly resonated with other international organizations for different reasons. For example, autonomy entailed decentralization of finance and management, a policy that was very much in line with economists' efficiency and cost-effectiveness approach to schooling. However, it also resonates with those who advocated for a humanitarian, rights-based approach to education as it strengthened community involvement and provoked positive associations with grassroots development and participatory governance. Even though the primary beliefs and visions of international governmental organizations varied drastically, the IOs built a coalition based on compromise and secondary beliefs (see Sabatier, 1988). What is more, the 1990 Education for All placed additional pressure on governments to prioritize educational expansion at a time when one global recession had just ended (1982), and a new one was on the horizon (1991). The conservative governments convinced intergovernmental organizations (IOs) to amplify their mission of reducing public expenditures in the social sector by making the public administration leaner, more efficient, and more cost-effective.

Their voice was amplified by an ever-growing number of IOs that directed their attention to education. As Martens et al. (2024) convincingly demonstrate, many IOs with no direct education policy mandate started engaging in education-related matters from the late 1960s onward. Their number increased to the extent that by the year 2023, a third of the entire population of IGOs (n = 30) operating in part or entirely in the education sector consisted of IOs that were designed to coordinate international economic cooperation, such as the World Bank, the OECD, or the regional development banks. Education-for-mandates—such as education for economic growth, peace, international understanding, sustainable development, and a global knowledge economy—became the standard line of argumentation to fund and promote education activities

in non-education IOs. On paper, UNESCO is in the education sector in charge of orchestrating the cacophony of voices and opinions pulling in opposite directions and different futures. UNESCO managed to do this by making governments, non-governmental organizations, foundations, *and* other international organizations agree on *one* future: in 1990, they agreed with Education for All that by 2000, all countries would have realized universal access to education, in 2000, they were in concert—as inscribed in the Millennium Development Goals—and in 2015, all actors signed off on the Sustainable Development Goals that includes seventeen goals and multiple targets within each of the goals to be realized by the year 2030. A few years are left to see whether the promises materialize; it is safe to assume they will be broken. In fact, none of the international agreements were achieved in time. Is that a problem?

## 2.2   Broken Promises and Impression Management

The coalition of signatories of international agreements is clearly not forged to last for perpetuity and actually rarely survives the years of the contractual arrangement. Similarly, the promises themselves are not inscribed in stone. Perhaps less known are the significant changes to the 2000 Millennium Development Goals two years after they were signed by 191 member states and 22 international organizations. In 2002, the International Conference on Financing for Education (known as the Monterrey Consensus) met to discuss international development finance. A total of 200 Ministers of Finance, Foreign Affairs, Development, and Trade participated in the event. IMF, the World Bank, WTO organizations, and other UN organizations represented the global actors. Even though the recommendations of the 2002 Monterrey Consensus were at the time considered to be vague, such as a non-specified commitment to good governance, domestic financing, and enhanced partnership for external assistance, it changed the course of how the MDGs, signed two years earlier, were implemented. It incentivized the private sector to participate in agenda setting, financing, and implementation of international development projects.

In line with the Third Way approach to governance that around the millennium started to actively promote public–private partnerships, the Monterrey Consensus elevated private actors into indispensable partners for advancing the development goals. The multi-stakeholder donor EFA Fast Track Initiative (renamed Global Partnership for Education), established in 2002, and the fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness

held in Busan in 2011 are only two of the most visible manifestations of a new aid architecture; one that was markedly different from earlier agreements. Soon after, new organizations such as the International Education Funders Group, Education Cannot Wait, or OECD's Network of Foundations Working for Development (NetFWD) were formed. In the same spirit, unexpected transformations occurred, such as UNICEF turning increasingly corporate, and new finance modalities such as results-based finance and development impact bonds were put in place; all reflecting the new, central role of the private sector in international cooperation.

A similar shift occurred after the SDGs were signed in 2015. Even though the targets of the educational SDG 4 are overly ambitious, the large donors (e.g., World Bank, FCDO, Gates Foundation) decided to narrowly focus on foundational learning and testing (McLean, 2023), as reflected in what they measure in terms of indicators and what they fund. Thus, it is more accurate to see international agreements such as EFA, MDGs, or SDGs as a marketplace of promises from which each donor selects the one(s) that align with the organization's mission and strategies.

Several scholars also wonder what happens when predictions fail. Do political actors lose credibility? Is there general mistrust in any future pledges? What happens to the plan itself when the prospect of a better, brighter future becomes a nightmare, as it did with the deregulation of the financial markets in 2008 (see Beckert, 2020)? Do decision-makers change the course of their thinking and drop the plan? In the education sector too, the prophecy that market regulation would drive down cost and drive up the quality of education had to give away to the sobering insight that choice and privatization benefited a few from the middle class but were detrimental to the masses that, for a variety of reasons, could not choose or were not chosen by high-performing schools.

De-institutionalizing, terminating, or suspending key policies of the neoliberal reform package, such as, for example, standardized testing, is difficult because, after a while, the policy objective has become decontextualized and is semantically detached from the initial reform argument (school-autonomy-with-accountability). To complicate matters, the terms themselves undergo semantic changes. As I will show later in this chapter (Sect. 3), the term accountability has experienced an inflationary usage over the last few decades, but it means different things during different periods: in the 1980s and 1990s, it was associated with demand–supply-type market accountability, in the 2000s, it

signaled accountability toward established standards, and in the current reform wave, it indicates social or public accountability, or accountability toward citizens. If placed in a temporal context, the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform should more correctly be labeled, depending on the time period, school-autonomy-with-market-accountability (the 1980s/1990s), school-autonomy-with-standards-accountability (2000s), or school-autonomy-with-public-accountability (2010s/2020s) (see Sect. 3).

Scholars in policy studies have used different terms to denote how policy analysts as well as decision-makers, regardless of their party affiliation, distracted from the negative findings of school reforms by recalibrating the targets. Gewirtz, Dickson, and Power (2004) borrowed the poignant term "impression management" from Irvin Goffmann's theory of interpersonal psychology to describe how the New Labour Government dealt with the failed experiment of the English Education Action Zones (EAZs); an initiative that was supposed to set new standards for how business, schools, and local authorities could closely collaborate together. Similarly, *Spin Cycle* (Henig, 2008) documents how researchers manipulated data, stretched interpretations, and redefined educational targets in favor of the US charter school movement. More recently, Lubienski et al. (2024) compared the research reports cited by EdChoice, an Indiana-based voucher advocacy organization founded and originally named after Milton and Rose Friedman, longitudinally over three different time periods. In an early period, EdChoice cited studies that emphasized the positive impact of voucher programs on student achievement. Once such studies were difficult to come by, it shifted the target to alternative outcomes such as parental satisfaction, attainment, competitive effects, and school safety. In the last round of reports documenting evidence for the positive impact of vouchers, EdChoice dropped the initial prediction of better learning outcomes in voucher programs altogether with the argument that parents do not really focus on test scores (Lubienski et al., 2024). The authors use the terms "information pollution" and "information silos" to show how political spin has reached an alarming level in the age of social media.

### 2.3   The Uneasy Union Between Performance Measurement and Target-Setting

Scholars have pointed out the rise of a new policy instrument that is captured with different terms, including performance-based measurement (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), governance by numbers (Grek & Ozga,

2008), or knowledge-based regulation (Fenwick et al., 2014). At closer examination, the new managerial approach to regulation links current inputs with expected or future outcomes. Thus, target-setting and performance measurement are inextricably linked. But they are too close for comfort.

Multi-year plans, whether they are signed off in an international arena (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals) or at the national level (sector plans), lock in policymakers for years to come. Seen negatively, they make governments unresponsive to changed realities. Public policy scholars with an affinity to punctuated equilibrium theories show the negative impact of such arrangements because they are deemed to be "maladaptive as the problem changes, guarantees policy volatility and disjointedness at some point in the future" (see Koski & Workman, 2021, p. 139). In a similar vein, researchers of policy feedback point to the importance of studying self-undermining mechanisms, such as lock-in effects, that constrain future policy decisions (Béland et al., 2022; Pierson, 1993). Long-term reform initiatives, such as international agreements and multi-year sector plans, may at first be a solution, but after a while, if pursued rigidly, they may become the cause of a problem. The tunnel vision required to rigorously pursue a multi-year plan closes off the sight of other priorities.

A relict of former communist countries, multi-year plans were pushed as a management tool during the era of New Public Management. Knowing of their innate ineptitude to respond to pressing issues in the present, why have these projections into the future, thirty years after NPM, survived? To iterate what has already been mentioned above, Australia and New Zealand were pioneers in establishing performance requirements and measurable targets in the 1980s and 1990s at all levels of government. Other countries followed suit and used them as a tool to monitor the quality of public services, first targeting the newly privatized areas of public service, then semi-autonomous government agencies, and finally all service providers, that is, both private and public providers. At the top level, line ministries presented a plan to their higher-ranking government office, such as, depending on the country annually, to the Ministry of Finance, the treasury, or the Prime Minister's Office that contained proposed areas of improvement. The plan was communicated upward as well as downward in the hierarchy and was used as a blueprint to determine the milestones for the work conducted at the departmental level. Measurable performance requirements and an ever-growing number of indicators accompanied the plan.

Outcomes-based reporting permeated all types of performance carried out in hierarchical structures, including in the classroom setting. For example, the Government of Mongolia secured two loans from the Asian Development Bank to introduce results-based management (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). The first one in 1999 ($25 million) was earmarked for the NPM-style management and finance reform, and the second one in 2003 ($15.5 million) targeted accountability and efficiency in health, education, social welfare, and labor. The loans also paid for policy pilgrimages to New Zealand. Every member of the Mongolian parliament and all senior-level staff at the ministries were sent on study tours to New Zealand. The idea of replacing interpersonal agreements, nepotism, and bribes with annual contracts that would clearly spell out expected outcomes was appealing, but many doubted that this would work in actual practice. Nevertheless, with funding and technical assistance from ADB in 2003, the Ministry of Education embarked on the experiment and published a 319-page handbook on outcomes-based education (OBE) with numerous examples of student benchmarks and teacher scorecards (MOECS, 2003). Students were taught to reflect, identify areas needing improvement, and set outcomes targets for their learning achievements.

Target-setting as a managerial tool for monitoring performance only captures half of its functions. Boswell writes of the "double life" of targets—performance measurement and political legitimization (Boswell, 2015). She contends that targets are "boundary objects" (Turnhout, 2009) in that they span two different social realities and are, therefore, understood and applied differently by the actors in the two communities. Managers see them as a planning and disciplining tool, and politicians treat them as a measurable pledge that enables them to signal, in due time, their achievements to the public. In the UK, the prime minister's Delivery Unit, established under New Labour (Blair) and designed and led by Sir Michael Barber, systematically pursued the dual objective of target-setting. However, as shown in Boswell's case study of UK asylum policy, government pledges do not stand the muster of political opponents, and the public is not as interested as assumed in the government's own performance assessment.

Target-setting is also plagued by all kinds of gaming strategies, categorized by Hood (2006) and highlighted by Boswell as follows:

Ratchet effects whereby managers artificially constrain performance so that they can subsequently demonstrate improvement; threshold effects, whereby those already performing at or above the target lack incentives to improve performance; and output distortion—that is, the manipulation of results to imply that targets have been met. (Boswell, 2015, p. 492)

Let us not forget that ministries and other government institutions are entrenched in party politics (Ladner et al., 2022). Similarly, intergovernmental bureaucracies are political institutions that reflect and report on the changing political landscape of national governments. Against this backdrop, multi-year agreements and future-oriented plans may be seen as binding contractual arrangements that shield the implementation process from politicization, administrative turnover, and stakeholder replacement. It enables bureaucracies at the national level to win time, at least for a while, to implement agreements or plans without political contestation. International donors, in turn, use multi-year education sector plans as a contract that recipient governments should honor regardless of political changes in their government.

There are noticeable differences in how national and global policy actors use targets. Governments tend to pursue an "underpromise and overdeliver" approach (Barber, 2007, p. 81; see also Boswell, 2015), whereas the opposite applies to global multi-year plans. Education for All (1990–2000) and the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) overpromised and underdelivered. The pledges made in the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030) are predictability also failing, as did the two previous international agreements.

## 3   THE SEQUENCE: THE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF REFORMS

Context matters also for bureaucracies. Reforms in the education sector may not be separated from reforms in other sectors and even less from reforms in the all-encompassing Ministry of Finance. The public administration reforms of the past decades, directed by Ministries of Finance, permeated all sectors, including the education sector. Moreover, the chronological order, or the sequence, in which they took place affected the substance of these changes: each reform presented itself as the solution for problems that the previous one supposedly could not resolve or, even

worse, generated. There is a tendency to exaggerate the shortcomings of the previous reform if for no other reason than to secure political support and mobilize financial resources for change. Nevertheless, sequence as an analytical prism affords us to understand how fundamental changes were justified at the time and how each reform distanced and differentiated itself from the preceding reform goal.

In his seminal article on sequence analysis, Abbott summarizes the wide spectrum of sequence analysis:

> Some look for dependence within sequences, some between. Some consider sequence for itself, others for its origins, still others for its causal power. (Abbott, 1995, p. 96)

Our interest lies in using sequence analysis for its causal power, an approach that acknowledges the relational or reactionary feature of reform rhetoric. The previous section showed how the worldwide demand for education forced governments to rethink their management and funding strategies in an era of global economic downturn. The efficiency and achievement gains argument became mainstreamed as part of the New Public Management narrative. In the education sector, NPM translated into autonomy and, a few years later, into school autonomy-with-accountability (SAWA). Seen as a causal chain of events or as a sequence, we may assert that SAWA was a reaction to the disastrous effects of deregulation that occurred a few years earlier during the period of school decentralization, privatization, and choice.

Three potential misunderstandings need to be averted upfront: Reforms are not always positive, systems do not converge internationally to the same universal model of public administration, and change is not inevitable.

First, there is a need to scratch the positive connotation of the term "reform." Concurring with Goldfinch's observation,

> [r]eform might refer to a process of change, but whether change is for the good, the bad, or neither—and for whom, as there are often winners and losers—is a question of history, evidence, and analysis to answer. (Goldfinch, 2023, p. 1)

Second, there should be neither universal nor sweeping claims associated with the term. Even though the four reform waves in public administration

presented in this section have spread globally, they are labeled and translated differently depending on the country's context. More often than not, changes happen incrementally (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009; Hacker et al., 2015), and whether a reform led to drift, conversion, hybridization, or layering is a matter of retrospective empirical analysis. Similarly, the reform itself ages; that is, changes over time are important to consider (see Chap. 4, Sect. 3).

The third misunderstanding is based on the fallacy that change is necessary, especially when the previous reform had shortcomings or failed. Politics permeate every aspect and stage in the policy process, including assessing the effectiveness of the previous reform. Depending on the party affiliation, decision-makers support or oppose reforms in which the role of the state in providing public goods and services is minimized. Political ideology, not rationality, drives change. It would be naïve to believe that change happens because a solution to a problem is found. Even the act of problem awareness is deeply political, let alone the process of finding a solution to a social problem.

Hall's differentiation into three types of changes, of which the third-order change, characterized by a change in policy goals and policy instruments, is far-reaching and serves us well to chronicle the fundamental changes of the past few decades in public administration and in the education sector (Hall, 1993; see Table 1.1). Table 3.1 provides an overview of how each reform positioned itself in opposition to the previous reform, what solutions it proposed and what promises it made, the type of regulation and accountability it put in place, and what role it assigned to the state.

There are different approaches to identifying reform waves in public administration (Wegrich, 2023). Given the political nature of reforms, this section is organized in terms of the state's role in each of the reforms. As Table 3.1 shows, the role of the state changed several times since the 1960s: from a strong state that managed social welfare (1960s/1970s) to a weak state that, in the wake of continuous deregulation, went dormant (1980s/1990s), to a reawakened evaluative state that encouraged private sector involvement under certain conditions (2000s), to a collaborative state that, voluntarily or involuntarily, engages with the public (2010s/2020s) (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1** The sequence of public administration and education sector reforms, 1960s–2020s

| Time period | Public administration reform | | | Education sector reform | | | All sectors | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Name | Problems of Previous Reform | Solution/Promise | Reform goal | Problems of Previous Reform | Solution/Promise | Type of Regulation | Type of Accountability | Role of the State |
| 1960s/70s | Traditional bureaucracy | Coupling of politics and administration | Rationalization Procedures Hierarchies | Equal opportunity | Reproduction of inequality Elite capture | Compensatory education | Inputs | State accountability | Welfare State |
| 1980s/90s | New Public Management | Rigidity Inertia Monopoly | Privatization Customer orientation | Autonomy | High public expenditures | Autonomy and choice leading to efficiency and achievement gains | Outputs | Market accountability | Entrepreneurial State |
| 2000s | Network Governance | Power dispersion | Public-private partnerships, whole-government approach | Quality | Inequity Unequal quality | Autonomy-with-accountability (SAWA) | Outcomes | Standards accountability | Interventionist State |
| 2010s/20s | E-Governance (also known as New Public Governance) | Citizens reduced to customers Fragmentation | Collaboration Data sharing Re-govern-mentalization | Transparency | Datafication Focus on numeracy & literacy | Transparency Focus on foundational learning (including wellbeing) | Public opinion | Public accountability | Engaged State |

### 3.1    The Welfare State: State Accountability Through Input Regulation

The welfare state is associated with redistribution policies such as progressive taxation, public pensions, and social security funds. The fiscal policy targeted greater taxation of the rich to support the poor. Similarly, the social security system relied on the workforce of the young, working generation to compensate the retired population for their lack of income. A Western model implied that the state, rather than the wider family or social network, should oversee caring for the poor, the retired, and other social groups needing financial support. The Western model of the welfare state was considered a yardstick for modernization, toward which the rest of the world eventually aspires to work. In the literature, this type of state regulation is labeled the "traditional" (Goldfinch, 2023, p. 3), the "bureaucratic-professional" (Maroy, 2012), or the "Weberian" model of public administration (Goldfinch, 2023, p. 3).

Max Weber described, more than a hundred years ago (1921), the ideal-type bureaucracy as an organization with the following six features (2019): (i) task specialization and division of labor, (ii) hierarchical management structure, (iii) formal selection rules of employees, (iv) uniform requirements with an emphasis on correct procedures, (v) impersonal relationships between state employees and citizens, and (vi) work as a form of vocation and, in the case of serving the sovereign, with a strong sense of being a government official. To this day, the proportion of politically appointed government staff versus trained professionals is an important factor for scholars of public administration to determine "state capacity" (Craft & Henderson, 2023).

As expected, key features of the model were not adopted universally. As presented earlier, the cadre system in China, where state employees are members of the Chinese Communist Party (Chan, 2022), runs counter to the strict division of politics and administration. The same role diffusion applies to former communist countries where civil servants, including mid-level bureaucrats (department heads at various levels of administration) and school directors, were seen as representatives of the government. Up until the 2010s, they were replaced whenever a new political party came to power. In Mongolia, it was customary up until the early 2000s for mid-level bureaucrats to camp out in their offices during election week out of fear that their desks would be assigned to a member of the incoming ruling party. To make aid-recipient governments replace political appointees with professionally trained government officials, the development banks and also bilateral donors

channel funds into the training of civil servants either in multi-month training courses offered at UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris or at the World Bank Institute (formerly named Economic Development Institute) in Washington, DC. At the same time, they pressure governments to change their recruitment criteria for all civil servants, replacing party affiliation with professional qualification. These ongoing efforts are attempts to sever the close ties between politics and administration and thereby eliminate the rapid personnel turnover in public administration.

Similarly, in OECD countries, the traditional model of bureaucracy has been only an ideal, and governments selectively adopt model features that best suit their cultural and political context (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Bromley and Meyer (2015) furthermore remind us that:

> [B]ureaucracies never worked according to the theory. The chain of command was broken at some point, as bureaucrats pursued interests of their own (now often called corruption) or reinterpreted rules in inventive ways. Or rules made no sense in particular local settings and were ignored or followed only in ritual. (Bromley & Meyer, 2015, p. 11)

Nevertheless, seen in a sequence, the ideal-type bureaucracy was trapped in an Iron Cage of Rationality characterized by efficiency, rational calculation, and control that was meant to suspend the influence of interpersonal networks (Weber, 2019). Contrary to the previous feudalistic model where politics and public administration were merged, "good bureaucracies" separated the two spheres, insisted that administrative decisions had to be rational and predictable, civil servants needed professional preparation and to see their work as a profession, and had procedures in place to shield government officials from political interference or social pressure.

In the education sector, the 1960s and 1970s were in advanced economies the era of compensatory education in which the state made additional funds available to support children from low socio-economic status to enroll and excel in education. In the US, the War on Poverty (1964) and a few years later, Head Start, targeting preschool children from poor households, are exemplars of compensatory programs. The sensitivity toward social inequality was also manifest in the multiculturalism, anti-racist, and post-colonization movements that spread globally toward the end of the era. The social welfare state required a sizeable state apparatus to manage redistribution programs and monitor equal inputs and opportunities.

In response to the rapid educational expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, public administration reform was mainly concerned with equipping

administrators with better planning tools. Several ministries of education started to adopt manpower tools with the hope that secondary school graduates would choose their further education in professions that were in demand. Ironically, a core feature of communist systems, the OECD promoted manpower planning in education for a while. It dropped manpower planning after a while because the predictions of what the labor market needs turned out to be wrong by the time the target groups completed their studies. Nevertheless, the very idea of manpower planning is indicative of a strong state, which both directs ("steers") and operates ("rows") educational institutions.

### 3.2    *The Entrepreneurial State: Market Accountability Through Output Regulation*

It was only the second reform wave, known as New Public Management, that revamped government structures and redefined the role of the state in public administration. The NPM reform of the 1980s and 1990s was an assemblage of beliefs pushed by neoliberal economists, implemented with the help of management consultants (Stone et al., 2019; Mazzucato & Collington, 2023; Prince, 2012), and strongly advocated by the OECD and the World Bank Group.

The temporal context matters as an analytical lens: NPM resonated with governments at a time when they had trouble keeping up with the high level of public expenditures. Equally important is the technological revolution in advanced economies, notably the move from one-line display typewriters to desktop computers in the 1980s. Management companies such as PwC, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, McKinsey, and other firms projected for governments how much they could reduce personnel costs by replacing secretaries and other employees with computers. Governments were quick to point at expert advice received from managing companies when they had to justify unpopular decisions such as cutting staff while at the same time investing a massive amount into technology at the workplace, with spiraling cost implications over the next few years. In countries of the Global South, the plan of cutting public expenditures and simultaneously increasing revenues by means of efficiency gains, outsourcing, or user fees sailed under the name of structural adjustment programs, a controversial policy imposed on loan-recipient governments. Mazzucato and Collington (2023) observe that the influence of management consultants was not confined to Europe and North America. The consultants were the "'foot

soldiers' of international governance organizations […] to export neoliberal reforms around the world" (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 55).

The ideal of a small state apparatus that should outsource, as much as possible, the production of public goods and the provision of public services to the private sector was entrenched in party politics. The great prospects of governments thinking like a business made Margaret Thatcher (1979–1989) proclaim messianically that economics is "the method" but ultimately, "the object is to change the soul" (Harvey, 2007, p. 23). Similar to Thatcher's belief that public management should be infused with an entrepreneurial spirit, US President Ronald Reagan at the time (1980–1988) identified the government as the problem, not the solution.

While considerations of the period, that is, the present context at the time, help elucidate the drivers of the NPM reform, it is equally revealing to situate the NPM reform within its own temporal order or sequence of public administration reforms. The negative associations with bureaucracy already existed prior to the NPM reform. Famous sociologist Robert K. Merton (1957), for example, criticized public servants in the 1950s as a group of professionals who worked in bureaucratic structures,

> where rules became an end in themselves and took on a rarefield and sanctified air; where impartiality and impersonal service became inflexibility, inhumanity, and brusqueness; and where esprit de corps becomes arrogance and distance from a population that in the end is that which was supposed to be served. (Merton, cited in Goldfinch, 2023, p. 5)

However, it was only the neoliberal proponents of NPM that presented an alternative, formulated in opposition to the traditional model, as illustrated in the opening paragraph of the bestseller *Reinventing Government*:

> An historic change is now coursing through all levels of American government: a shift from the rigid, wasteful, centralized bureaucracies of the industrial era to the more flexible, entrepreneurial, decentralized government needed to succeed in today's world. This shift, under way for more than a decade, has been brought into sharp relief by the fiscal crisis now crippling our governments. (Osborne, 1992)

The frequently cited NPM mantra—the government should steer and not row—aimed to end the state monopoly over public services. The entrepreneurial state is meant to provide direction while stepping back from being the sole provider, encouraging business involvement in the public sector. Citizens should be treated like customers who, through their freedom of

choice, help improve the quality of public services. They vote with their feet in that they simply switch providers if they are dissatisfied with the product or service; they "exit" (Hirschman, 1972). In the early years of managerial reform, before standards and accountability measures were established, choice, per capita financing, and vouchers were viewed as ways to reduce public expenditures while improving the quality of education. Milton Friedman's argument for cost savings through efficiency gains generated by market regulation was prominent. In the early, market-driven Miltonian vision of NPM, there was neither a need nor a role for government because the pressure to perform came from supply and demand. Low-performing schools would lose customers, and due to per-capita financing, they would lose funding and ultimately close down as parents enrolled their children in better-performing schools.

NPM aimed to overhaul the traditional hierarchical government structure, which consisted of a large central administration that directed the lower levels of government at the province and district levels. In education, the reform entailed a shift of decision-making authority from the central to lower levels of government and the establishment of numerous semi-autonomous state-affiliated agencies. The reform was adopted for various reasons, depending on the history and the policy context in a given country. In countries of the Global South, structural adjustment programs not only aimed at reducing public expenditures but, as Rondinelli et al. (1983, p. 20) elaborates, also satisfied secondary, organizational, and individual agendas. He recounts how "international assistance agencies" created semi-autonomous public authorities, now called project implementation units, typically located in the ministry yet staffed and equipped with funding from international donors. The parallel structure allowed donors to keep their budgeting and accounting process separate from that of the ministry:

> International donors have wanted their projects to be "quarantined," not simply to protect them from the inefficiency of the civil service, but to make them more visible. This arrangement makes the projects easier to evaluate and allows "show-cases" to be created through which follow-on funding can be more readily generated. (Rondinelli et al., 1983, p. 20)

The development banks were not the only donors that transferred NPM to countries of the Global South. A study by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (Labri, 1999) concludes that "variants of NPM techniques and practices" were embedded in the structural adjustment programs and, therefore, spread to many aid-dependent countries

that relied on external financial assistance. For example, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Sri Lanka established autonomous agencies within the public sector to decentralize and downsize central administration. The UNRISD report lists Bolivia, Ghana, India, Senegal, and Zimbabwe as examples of countries that introduced, in the 1990s, performance contracting and contracting out as instruments to reform state-owned enterprises.

Strikingly, the policy studies literature is fixated on the managerial aspects of the neoliberal reform and tends to turn a blind eye to the equally crucial new procurement laws that went into effect at the same time. NPM required governments to make open bids for public services and then subsequently make contractual arrangements with the selected providers, as shown earlier (see Chap. 2, Sect. 2.1), the Ministries of Finance in OECD countries needed first to assess what, from the perspective of professionals situated in the various line ministries, a contract with state institutions would need to entail and how "success" or good performance should be measured. In another publication, we presented the collaboration between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture of Iceland to determine how a contractual arrangement, outsourced to non-state providers, should look like (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024b, see Chap. 2, Sect. 2.1). A short recount of the Icelandic case may be useful to show why contracting became such a central policy instrument in NPM. In 1995, in cooperation with five selected line ministries, the Ministry of Finance of Iceland experimented with contract management (*Samningsstjórnun*). The government at the time understood similar public administration reforms were going on in other OECD countries. As pointed out in the introductory section of the guidelines:

> [t]he employees of the [Icelandic] Ministry of Finance familiarized themselves with how this type of agreement [contract management] is done, visited ministries and institutions in countries that have tried this method, and attended conferences at the OECD Administrative Committee on this topic. (Ministry of Finance, 1995)

As part of the agreement between the Icelandic Ministry of Finance and the Minister of Education, Science, and Culture, the selected partner school (Kvennaskólinn in Reykjavik) developed standards and criteria against which their performance could be evaluated once pedagogical services would be outsourced to non-state providers.

The handover from ministries of finance to line ministries marks the birth of outputs-based regulation (see Table 3.1). The previous type of regulation—compliance with government-issued norms in terms of class size, teacher qualification, textbooks, and other "input" features—was replaced with a new type of regulation: one focusing on outputs. The deregulation on the input side implied that the schools were—in some countries more than in others—granted autonomy over how they teach and whom they hire as long as they deliver the services for which they were paid from public funds. The output or deliverable orientation of NPM enabled private or non-state providers to produce educational goods and operate schools with funding from the state. They registered, were accredited, and, in many instances, were paid vouchers for each student that they enrolled, regardless of the quality of their services.

### 3.3    The Interventionist State: Standards Accountability Through Outcomes Regulation

Strikingly, standardized testing to assess the quality of education was an afterthought of NPM and only emerged as the primary instrument of quality assurance in the 2000s. Acknowledging the sequence and the time lag between the two reform waves—the neoliberal push for market accountability in the 1980s and 1990s and the politically centrist belief in standards accountability in 2000—helps us complicate the SAWA narrative. Standards accountability, reflected in SAWA, was the policy response to the NPM reform that produced disastrous effects on inequity with only minimal achievement gains (Levin, 1998; Carnoy, 2024).

The centrist approach was simultaneously pro-business and pro-state regulation, promoted at the time most prominently by the New Labour Government in the UK (Tony Blair, Gordon Brown), the Clinton administration in the US, and perhaps less known among Anglophone readers, by social democrats and centrist parties in Germany. In Europe, the two heads of state Tony Blair (U.K.) and Gerhard Schröder (Germany), joined forces in their appeal to their European peer "to modernize" the traditional, social-democratic attitude toward the private sector, which expected the state to regulate the market in order to secure jobs and facilitate economic growth for all (Blair & Schröder, 1998, p. 2). The two statesmen contended that the left wing of their party overstated the weaknesses of markets and underestimates their strengths. According to their appeal, these "old approaches and traditional policy instruments" of social

democratic governments led to a "disproportionate expansion of the government's reach and the bureaucracy that went with it" (Blair & Schröder, 1998, p. 3). They urged their like-minded heads of state to consider the negative budgetary implications of the old model of social democracy: "public expenditure as a proportion of national income has more or less reached the limits of acceptability" (Blair & Schröder, 1998, p. 4). At the same time, they distanced themselves from the immediate past ("entrepreneurial state") as well as from the "welfare state" (see Table 3.1):

> The past two decades of neo-liberal laissez-faire are over. In its place, however, there must not be a renaissance of 1970s-style reliance on deficit spending and heavy-handed state intervention. (Blair & Schröder, 1998, p. 5)

They called for a centrist approach in which the state adopts principles of market regulation in their own public administration (demand/supply-driven, efficiency, cost-effectiveness) and invites the private sector to carry out public services. At the same time, the state should constantly evaluate the services provided by non-state actors and, if necessary, intervene when they are subpar:

> Within the public sector bureaucracy at all levels must be reduced, performance targets and objectives formulated, the quality of public services rigorously monitored, and bad performance rooted out. (Blair & Schröder, 1998, p. 4)

In Third Way Governance, "performance targets" were seen as the counter-measure to combat the neo-liberal laissez-faire vision in which the state pursues a vision of "let market actors do" (Schmidt, 2009) For this reason, it is inaccurate to label the rise of standardized testing or the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform as a neoliberal movement. The contrary applies. It was an attempt to de-escalate rapid privatization and minimize the widening inequity and quality gap between low- and high-performing schools that, at closer examination, correlated with a student's socio-economic background. Standardized testing was propelled as an accountability instrument by progressive political forces, not by conservative ones, as often assumed. It was a means to terminate market regulation, promoted by hardcore choice and privatization advocates, and restore the authority of the state to steer the system without necessarily

being the sole provider of public goods and services, as it used to be pre-NPM.

Maroy (2012) observes the emergence of two models of post-bureaucratic governance over the period 1980–2005: quasi-market regulation and the evaluative state. He found that some countries (such as Belgium) with an already-existing net of privately owned schools were more akin to embracing NPM's question for school autonomy and market accountability. In contrast, other countries (such as France) with a history of a strong centralist state that promotes the idea of national curricula and standards were more amenable to standards accountability or, to use Maroy's term, to the "evaluative state." His point on path dependency is very much on target. Indeed, some countries, such as Switzerland, never bought into the ideas of choice, privatization, and market regulation but increased testing considerably over the past thirty years (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024a). In contrast, other countries, such as Iceland, fully endorsed school autonomy and choice but rejected the introduction of standardized testing at key stages of the education system (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024b). Yet, from a transnational perspective, it is important to acknowledge that both reform movements traveled around the globe, including Switzerland and Iceland. The policymakers in those countries simply did not buy into the theory of change but rather selectively adopted elements of the global script that, with a time lag and with different political drivers, surfaced in every corner of the world.

As Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) observed, "there has been a tendency to over-concentrate on the NPM" (p. 14). Of course, NPM was influential globally, but other reforms post-NPM were influential, too. More than the quasi-market reform of NPM, the standards accountability reform that advanced network governance (public and private sector) and outcomes-measurement set in motion "governance by numbers" (Ozga, 2020) and "governance by data circulation" (Piattoeva et al., 2018), and has led to an almost unstoppable process of datafication in the education sector (Williamson, 2019; Lewis et al., 2022). NPM is nowadays considered "dead in the water" (Dunleavy et al., 2005), but perhaps the reform has eclipsed other public administration reforms of the past two decades simply because it left behind a fragmentation and understaffing of public service.

In the education sector, there clearly were two reform waves (at first market accountability, then standards accountability), and not a combined one (quasi-market regulation with performance measurement). The first reform entailed mostly changes in governance (devolution of

decision-making authority to sub-national level and school level), pro-curement, and management (school-based management and school autonomy). The second reform entailed performance measurement by way of first establishing standardized curricula frameworks and thereafter standardized tests. The chronological order of the two reform bundles is best illustrated in the study of Yagi and Uno (2024). They searched for autonomy and accountability-related keywords in the World Education Reform Database, which includes over 10,000 policy documents from 192 countries, issued since 1970. They found that the terms "account-ability" and "accountable" only started to appear at a grand scale in the titles of policy documents starting in 1990 and were used in an inflation-ary manner until approximately 2014. After that period few new laws and regulations were passed on that issue, most likely because accountability policies were already institutionalized and mainstreamed. The terms are closely associated with performance measurement. Before the early 1990s, governments used inspections and reporting to monitor compliance with laws and regulations.

Above, I discussed the intersectoral translation process involved during the NPM era when the Ministry of Finance of Iceland asked the Ministry of Education to determine how contractual agreements should look like in education once non-state actors were invited to bid for public goods and services. A second translation process occurred after NPM; this time it was a political handover. The newly elected centrist governments in the early adopter countries—Blair in the UK (1997–2007) and Bill Clinton in the US (1993–2001)—inherited from the previous conservative governments (Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US) a deregulated and unequal education system driven by profit and business interests. In an effort of damage control, they re-regulated the sector by establishing standards, promoting standardized tests, formulating accreditation criteria (for pri-vate and public institutions), and enshrining a series of other accountabil-ity measures. Different from socialist and other social-democratic parties that were leaning to the left and fought against the privatization of the public sector, the Blair and Clinton administrations were business-friendly, centrist politicians. They pursued a Third Way political approach, which established standards for quality assurance that would guide business involvement and public–private partnerships in the education sector. Third Way politics was supposed to be neither socialist nor capitalist, yet private foundations continuously gained power vis-à-vis governments and moved from being solely contractors to becoming influential policy advisors to governments (Au & Lubienski, 2016). Along the same trend,

governments typically took the risk, and businesses kept the profit in public–private partnership arrangements (Draxler & Steiner-Khamsi, 2018), making the relationship deeply flawed and imbalanced.

In concert with the trend toward performance measurement, standardized tests as an accountability tool experienced exponential growth at all levels of the education system, in more and more school subjects, and are now used for all kinds of comparisons, ranging from the school to the international level. The exponential growth occurred a few years after the inception of OECD's PISA. Are the two trends related? What is the cause, and what is the effect? Did PISA cause the worldwide surge in standardized assessment? Or was PISA created in response to governments embracing outcomes regulation? The answer is both. The dictum of evidence-based policymaking and the proliferation of international large-scale student assessments such as PISA mutually enforced each other.

The use of data in the education sector is by no means a new phenomenon. In fact, comparative education has encouraged the use of data for all kinds of purposes. In the second half of the nineteenth century, governments started documenting their educational success vis-à-vis others in World Exhibitions (Lawn, 2013). In 1960, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) launched its first study with 12 participating countries to assess 13-year-olds' achievement in several subjects. However, as a policy tool, "governance by numbers" only took off globally in the new millennium. There are many explanations for why IEA studies had less media attention and a smaller policy impact than OECD studies: IEA resisted for a long time the production of alarmist horse-race-type league tables in which countries are ranked in order of their performance (Pizmony-Levy, 2013). The presentation of the test results is nuanced, requiring interpretation by experts. In contrast, OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills benefits from the OECD's large communication apparatus that knows how to generate public attention, especially when the PISA results are released (Addey, 2022). I see two additional reasons why politicians tend to reference PISA results more than results from IEA studies: The OECD is closer to the government and the IEA closer to the research community, as evidenced by the composition of the two organizations' general assemblies. The promissory potential of PISA studies—predicting how students' performance on standardized tests impacts the country's economy in the future—is more meaningful for politicians. Furthermore, the OECD presents itself as a think tank and advisor for governments, providing them with a diagnosis of their system's health *and* a prescription for how to fix it.

### 3.4 The Engaged State: Public Accountability Through Public Opinion Feedback

We are currently at the cusp of a new era fundamentally shaped by the possibilities of the Internet, machine learning, and AI. Social media created information silos minimizing shared public knowledge. Furthermore, as one of the biggest data collectors in the digital era, the state is pressured to justify its accumulation of data and pay rent materially and immaterially to those who were the object of data collection: the citizens.

The new public administration reform is closely tied to the advances in information and communications technology (ICT), the political power of social media, and the new types of production, assetization, and capital accumulation in the digital economy (see Birch, 2020). Schedler et al. (2019) see a logical progression from e-government or "open government" to smart government, which will incorporate Artificial Intelligence to come up with "new service delivery models by connecting and integrating physical, digital, public, and private environments" (Schedler et al., 2019, p. 3). The common denominator among these variants of the ongoing public administration reform is the expectation that the data producer (citizens) should also be the data user and participate, more than before, in the political process. The state should engage with and listen to citizens. The shift from the interventionist to the engaging state entails a changed role of the state, which considers itself to be transparent, socially accountable, and responsive to citizens. In some countries, the reform sails under the name New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010).

Reviewing developments in advanced economies, Mattei (2023) observes the contours of a new shift in today's era of e-governance. In the most recent shift, the "engaged state" (Mattei, 2023) opens itself up to citizens, makes its public services user-friendly, and cares about public opinion. A good case in point is the global spread of participatory budgeting, well documented in public policy transfer research (Porto de Oliveira, 2017). It started as a pilot project in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989 and was disseminated globally with the financial support of development banks. I concur with Mattei's assertion: data is used for accountability purposes both by the state and the citizens: in democracies, the state draws on data to monitor publicly funded (public and private) institutions and, vice-versa, citizens use data, rankings, and ratings to assess the quality of public services that they are entitled too. The goal is more transparency, the instrument is datafication, and the requirement is open access to data and information.

The popularity of accountability and its metamorphosis from a once contested government tool into a ubiquitously used, multi-functional approach to governance is astounding. Initially, it was designed as a tool of government for quality assurance, thereby enabling non-state actors to operate schools. In the post-NPM era and with the move toward evidence-based policymaking, the notion of accountability has been reframed as a tool of empowerment for communities and citizens to hold the government accountable. Civil society organizations draw on data and evidence to participate in policymaking. The semantic shift of accountability from government control to community empowerment deserves a few reflections.

Dunleavy et al. (2005) identify three key components of digital-era governance: reintegration, needs-based holism, and digitization process. The first component entails a reversal of NPM reforms, notably rollback of agencification, re-governmentalization, reinstating central processes, radically squeezing production costs, procurement concentration and specialization, and network simplification. As with all reforms, one of the elements of the new fundamental reform is to replace the policy goal and undo elements of the previous reform. The NPM reform (1980s/1990s), more than the network governance reform (2000s), revamped and reorganized the system. In some countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, the central administration was reduced as part of NPM thinking, imposed on the government in the structural adjustment program. In the new millennium, the Ministry of Education and Science was small (less than fifty technical staff for the entire country) and powerless as compared to the province-level governments, the municipal governments, the President's Office, numerous agencies, and the Kyrgyz Academy of Education. In many countries, we already see that the structures, practices, and norms propelled during the NPM era—numerous accredited private agencies fulfilling public functions, outsourcing, and small government—are reversed.

In the education sector, the notion of accountability has experienced a remarkable journey since its inception. The 2017/2018 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO GEMR, 2017) made the case for incorporating accountability in every aspect of the education system. Nowadays, everyone is accountable to everyone, as shown in the titles of the report Chapters: "Governments must build formal mechanisms that help hold them accountable," "Formal evaluations are the most common mechanism for holding teachers accountable," "Mechanisms exist to hold parents accountable for regular school attendance," "Mapping the

responsibilities of international actors," or "Government and civil society can hold instructional material companies to account" (UNESCO GEMR, 2017). Client or user-centrism already was a central argument for the NPM reform. The continuous datafication, combined with the opportunities of open access to and wide and cheap dissemination of information in the digital age, opened new avenues for accountability measures. Nowadays, data is not only used by the government to monitor the delivery of public goods and services, provided by state and non-state actors and paid with taxpayers' money but, vice-versa, data is now also weaponized by civil society organizations and advocacy groups to hold governments and intergovernmental organizations accountable. A good case in point is NORRAG's campaign to count the uncounted in education in emergency settings: internally displaced persons and other social groups that fall through the cracks because neither governments nor intergovernmental organizations count them.[13] In sum, the twenty-first-century public management reforms focus on e-government and digital government with the goal of making bureaucracies more user-friendly, transparent, open, and responsive to citizens' needs.

The notion of an engaged state that listens to its constituents provokes perhaps too many positive associations. The temporal order of public administration reforms and the changes in the role of the state that triggered the changes are essential to keep in mind. The state is only "engaging" if compared with the earlier roles of the state, notably, the interventionist, entrepreneurial, and welfare state. Already years ago, under the New Public Management era of the entrepreneurial state, the nation-state's power dwindled considerably as it rescaled upward, downward, and outward to transnational institutions, sub-national entities, and non-state actors, respectively (Jessop, 2002). In many countries, the state of the twenty-first century has a drastically reduced state apparatus as compared to the state half a century ago. The twenty-first state is a hollow state.

As with the previous public administration reforms (see Table 3.1), the OECD and the World Bank have taken the lead in promoting and implementing the new version of "good governance" by means of policy papers, handbooks, checklists, and best practices. The OECD Good Practice Principles for Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age (OECD, 2022) consist of nine principles arranged under the following three pillars:

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[13] For example: https://www.norrag.org/6-october-2021-norrag-sdc-and-development-initiatives-host-high-level-session-at-un-world-data-forum/

'Build accessible, ethical and equitable public services that prioritise user needs, rather than government needs'; 'Deliver with impact, at scale and with pace'; and 'Be accountable and transparent in the design and delivery of public services to reinforce and strengthen public trust.' (OECD, 2022)

Similarly, in 2014, the World Bank Group presented its strategic framework for citizenship engagement on how to enhance demand-side accountability of public services (World Bank Group, 2014). The framework set targets to measure beneficiary feedback into 100 percent of investment projects. It also stipulated a scaling up of consultations and presented action points on moving the citizen engagement agenda forward. As would not be expected otherwise, the World Bank Group, composed of the World Bank, International Finance Corporation, and Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, periodically evaluates the implementation of its framework (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2018).

In addition, the World Bank measures digital transformation in the public sector in 198 economies and has made developed databanks and dashboards publicly available, which they use to monitor national progress. The World Bank's GovTech Maturity Index (GTMI) consists of four components (World Bank, 2022), listed in the following:

- **CGSI**: The Core Government Systems Index (seventeen indicators) captures the key aspects of a whole-of-government approach, including government cloud, interoperability framework, and other platforms.
- **PSDI**: The Public Service Delivery Index (nine indicators) measures the maturity of online public service portals, focusing on citizen-centric design and universal accessibility.
- **DCEI**: The Digital Citizen Engagement Index (six indicators) measures aspects of public participation platforms, citizen feedback mechanisms, open data, and open government portals.
- **GTEI**: The GovTech Enablers Index (sixteen indicators) captures strategy, institutions, laws, and regulations, as well as digital skills and innovation policies and programs, to foster GovTech.

What are we to make of the fact that the current e-government reform, promoted by the same two intergovernmental organizations, the OECD and the World Bank, previously pushed for an entrepreneurial

state (deregulation) and then a few years later for an interventionist state (re-regulation)? Is e-government public administration (re-governmentalization) reform really a fundamental reform with a new reform goal (democratization) and new promises (transparency, whole education)? Is the current reform system immanent, that is, a logical consequence of the previous reform, or does it entail a paradigm shift? Without any doubt, datafication everywhere and of everything is a logical consequence of governance by numbers, but its uses have diversified and now include the use of data for citizen engagement and accountability toward the public. In the new wave of public administration reform, the citizens become co-producers and co-deliverers of public goods and services (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021). The shift from central regulation to social accountability is also discernible in the technology sector: Following in the footsteps of X and the new Trump administration, Meta replaced in January 2025 fact-checking with user feedback and AI. Under great protest, X had earlier replaced fact-checking with "community notes," whereby users may contest the assertions posted by others in a never-ending feedback loop. Despite the positive connotation ("Engaged State"), handing over control to the citizen resonates with ultra-right political movements that combat "the deep state" and target the deconstruction of the administrative state.

Strikingly, citizenship engagement is a constitutive element of OECD's 2030 Learning Compass and of the World Bank's recent line of work, reflected in the Foundational Learning Compact[14]:

> Growing evidence suggests that, under the right conditions, meaningful forms of citizen engagement and social accountability (CESA) can result in better governance, citizen empowerment, more positive and constructive citizen-state relations, strengthened public service delivery, and, ultimately, enhanced development effectiveness and well-being. (World Bank, 2023)

Of course, it is necessary to scrutinize what the ideal-type citizen, promoted by the OECD and the World Bank, is. What is more, several large economies, such as Brazil, Hungary, Poland, and the United States, have experienced democratic backsliding in recent years (Morais de Sá e Silva & Ávila Gomide, 2024). Many other countries have elected authoritarian, nationalistic heads of state. It is only a matter of time before the new centrist and right-wing representatives make themselves heard at the global

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[14] See https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/citizen-engagement#1

level in international meetings and agreements. This is when the Engaged State will be replaced by a new notion of the state, advanced by this new group of powerful leaders. Certainly, both the size and the power of the state to regulate and steer have dwindled and will continue to decrease over the next few years.

In sum, it is important to remember that every reform is, first and foremost, a reaction to the previous reform. In other words, sequence matters. The entrepreneurial state was a response to the redistributive welfare state that could not keep up with the growing demand for education and social services; the interventionist state was a reaction to the entrepreneurial state that went overboard with deregulation, marketization, and privatization, and the engaged state is a response to the datafication of society in the digital era. The shift from state governance to network governance has been well-documented (Voisin, 2022). In the most recent reform, network governance involves non-state entities (businesses, non-governmental organizations, professional associations, etc.) and individuals who readily and openly express their opinions about public services online, in social media, and in public opinion polls, and who keep an eye on what the government is doing.

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# Reception and Translation into the Local Context: The Timing, Lifespan, and Age of Reforms

The previous chapter dealt with the global developments that accounted for the spread, dissemination, or diffusion of the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform. It did so by way of a macro-level analysis of the historical context at the time that gave rise to the reform (Chap. 3, Sect. 1), the expectations and hopes it raised (Chap. 3, Sect. 2), and how the various public administration reforms defined themselves in opposition to previous reforms that went global (Chap. 3, Sect. 3). Thus, the three temporalities discussed in Chap. 3 were the present, the future, and the sequence.

In contrast, this chapter addresses questions of reception and translation in policy transfer processes at the local or national level. Rather than insinuating that government must inevitably give in to "global forces," a meso-level perspective brings to light when, how, and why local or national policy actors buy into or "borrow" a global reform. The analytical unit is the local policy context. It is the policy context that explains why there is receptiveness at a particular moment to borrow a global reform (this chapter, Sect. 1), how the reform is subsequently translated and institutionalized in the transfer space (this chapter, Sect. 2), and how the various features of a reform (its goal, bundle of policies, policy instruments) age or change over time (this chapter, Sect. 3). All in all, this chapter introduces three more temporalities: timing, lifespan, and age.

# 1    TIMING: WINDOWS FOR CHANGE

A trove of fascinating studies examines when and how governments seize, engender, or conjure opportunities for change. Every policy decision is ultimately political, reflecting, at least in democracies, a sometimes long and tedious process of political negotiations, compromise, and coalition-building. Therefore, we are well advised to consider the broader political constellation and values and resources that bolster or hinder change. Such a perspective is diametrically opposed to commonsensical imaginaries of a policy cycle as a neat, rational problem-solving enterprise that starts out with a clear definition of the issue, proceeds with searching for solutions, evaluates various policy options, and ultimately culminates in the government choosing the "best" one (most feasible, cost-effective, etc.) as the policy. The meandering path to policy decisions also applies to the fuzziness of problem definition. A shock, an event, a crisis, or an issue is in and of itself not a trigger for change unless it is perceived and framed as a problem that deserves a political response. This explains why the agenda-setting process has been studied in detail in the theories on the policy process (see Shivakoti & Howlett, 2022).

Of course, some stages in the policy process enable greater public scrutiny and participation than others. Policy advocacy groups in education, such as Education Out Loud, Girls Not Brides, the Right to Education Initiative, and previously, the Open Society Foundations, use all kinds of strategies to make themselves heard. Among them is "getting the timing right," such as intervening during a time period when the government is open for input or presents its next medium-term budget plan to the broader public (see Young & Quinn, 2012). There are also procedural constraints—for example, election cycles of legislators—that generate a specific "time budget" within which major decisions need to be proposed, reviewed, discussed, and passed (Koss, 2019). Besides these pragmatic reasons, broader factors explain the timing of policy action.

Underlying most interpretive frameworks that investigate momentums for change is the observation of a "punctuated equilibrium" (True et al., 2007). Baumgartner and Jones (1993) came up with the term to summarize the pattern they identified in their study of policy changes in the US. They observed that long periods of stability, equilibrium, or stasis are interrupted or punctuated by bursts of reform activity during short periods of rapid change. Punctuated equilibrium theories are sensitive to the question of timing as they attempt to explain non-incremental or radical

changes, or as True, Baumgartner and Jones put it, a "large-scale departure" from periods during which no or only minimal changes took place (True et al., 2007, p. 155). The question thus becomes: what exactly occurred at that very moment when decisive policy discussions were made?

### 1.1    The Confluence of Problem Awareness, Policy Solutions, Political Support

The multiple streams framework of John Kingdon (1984) has caught the attention of many scholars in comparative policy studies in education. It has been applied, for example, to understand the timing for the introduction of the Free-Semester Program in South Korea (Baek, 2021) or how the non-governmental organization Oxfam attempted to influence policy decisions by means of agenda-setting (Shephard et al., 2020). Baek pursues the timing question by examining why the Free-Semester Program in lower secondary schools in South Korea was only rolled out nationwide in 2016 despite three previous attempts to remove standardized exams and strengthen career exploration for the duration of one or two semesters, notably, the Free Study Day in 1972, Day Without Schoolbags in 1995, and Open Education in 2001. He highlights the role of policy entrepreneurs who, on the one hand, created reform pressure by evoking a sense of urgency to tackle the long-standing problem of stressful, high-stakes standardized tests at a time when students are supposed to plan for their professional future and, on the other, pushed for an innovative solution to the problem, namely the Semester-Free Program. Applying the multiple streams framework, Baek shows that these change agents or policy entrepreneurs coupled problem awareness with policy solutions. The government, in turn, successfully reframed older policy ideas in terms of the current OECD's twenty-first-century competency discourse and thereby managed to mobilize political support for scaling up the policy throughout the nation.

Similar to Baek, who demonstrates the importance of international comparison for generating problem awareness, Shephard et al. (2020) also advance the transnational dimension in their analysis of the three streams. According to the framework, the three streams—problem, policy, and politics—operate independently from each other. However, a policy window or a window for change occurs when the three streams are coupled. Policy entrepreneurs are, according to the multiple streams frameworks, instrumental for agenda-setting because they connect their preferred

solution or policy with a problem that is being discussed. Shephard et al.'s qualitative comparative analysis covers twenty countries where Oxfam tried various strategies to influence policy decisions by amplifying problem awareness and, at the same time, offering policy solutions.

Kingdon's multiple streams framework is devoid of technical jargon, colorful in the use of metaphors, and filled with convincing and easy-to-understand assertions on when and under which conditions, opportunities for change open. Unsurprisingly, the simple Google Scholar search conducted by DeLeo et al. (2024) yielded over 30,000 citations of Kingdon's book alone. DeLeo et al. (2024), Béland and Howlett (2016), and Cairney (2021) attribute the popularity to the somewhat imprecise or broad key concepts of the framework, leaving a lot of room for interpretation and application. For this reason, these and other scholars have advanced the thinking on the three independent streams by investigating understudied aspects of the framework, for example, the role of feedback in the problem stream, by differentiating between the policy domain and the macro-level political system in the politics stream, by debating the larger implications for the study of the policy process when we abandon long-held assumptions about the sequence of the various stages in a policy cycle, and by highlighting the importance of ideas in all three streams (see Béland, 2015; Béland et al., 2022). There is also an interesting discussion on how to measure the three streams in general (Weible & Workman, 2022) and in the era of the digital economy in particular (Margetts & Hood, 2016).

Clearly, there is a need to catapult and adapt the multiple streams framework to the changed policy ecosystem of the twenty-first century. Just think how Internet technologies facilitate collective action which, in turn, impacts what is perceived by whom as a problem, which universe of solutions is made publicly available and propelled, and how effortlessly individuals and groups may be mobilized for or against political coalitions. Margetts and Hood (2016) contend that governments are being challenged "by groups of citizens who have as their main weapon an ability to communicate and coordinate the resources of large numbers of people" (p. 1). The Internet technologies they refer to are mobile or web-based technologies and include blogs or micro-blogs (Twitter), social networking sites, content-sharing sites, social bookmarking sites, projects to produce online goods (e.g., Wikipedia), and virtual worlds for gaming or socializing.

A challenge for all theories of the policy process, including the multiple streams framework, that attaches great importance to information for generating problem awareness, proposing policy solutions, and relying on public opinion for the politics stream is today's "information pollution" (Malin & Lubienski, 2022) and "post-truthiness" (Perl et al., 2018, p. 581). Perl et al. (2018) convincingly show how the use of information is central in the multiple streams framework:

> Each stream contains components of policy deliberations that originate independently from one another, but which can combine to transform policymaking at particular junctures. Within the problem stream, one finds the ideas and information that can focus public attention on and characterize a specific problem as being worthy of government's attention. The policy stream contains the expertise of specialists, scientists, and pundits who present remedies and recommendations for addressing one or more public problems. And the political stream carries within it the claims of, and expectations about, governing authority that are generated by public opinion, the party organizations, and interest group efforts to gain or retain power in government. (p. 593)

As a result of the conjuncture of the three streams: "the resulting accumulation of ideas, interests, and information can either open or close a 'policy window' which moves problems onto or off of the formal agenda, and thus influences whether government will attend to them in policymaking" (Perl et al., 2018, p. 593).

There is a need to adjust the multiple streams and factor in truthiness and the surplus of information when relying on information for policymaking. Internet technologies are not the only devices that turn the three streams into raging rivers. A host of other sources exist that governments or interest groups may activate at will to accelerate problem awareness and policy solutions and, somewhat more complexly, generate political support. The multiplicity of resources that nowadays flow into each of the three streams is noticeable to all with a keen attentiveness to global and transnational aspects of the policy process. For example, OECD's PISA couples the problem and policy streams and thus functions very much like a policy broker *par excellence* (Steiner-Khamsi, 2024): the PISA test creates awareness about the below or above-average performance of 15-year-olds on international large-scale assessment and, at the same time provides policy advice on how to fix the system, if necessary.

### *1.2    Explaining Reform Intensity*

The study of the Stanford/Toronto research group (Bromley & Kijima), introduced in Chap. 1, Sect. 1.2, identifies periods of relative stability punctuated by a burst of reform activity. The authors found a heightened reform activity worldwide during the neoliberal era from 1992 to 2008. Their important intellectual project directs attention to global trends.

One may draw on the same database (World Education Reform Database) and replicate Bromley et al.'s research design to assess and understand the reasons for reform intensity at the country and regional level. For example, Yagi and Uno (2024) identified different periods of heightened reform frequency depending on the world region and income level. The high-income OECD countries issued more legislative changes during the neoliberal era of 1992–2008 than before or after this period. This pattern did not emerge, however, for other countries. Aid-recipient countries had a surge in policy action after the end of colonial rule, dictatorships, or revolutions, and others passed legislative acts once external financial assistance started to kick in.

Several other student research teams compared the reform frequency of countries with the same income level (low, lower-middle, upper-middle, high income) located within the same world region.[1] One of the studies (Okamoto et al., 2024) compared reform inertia versus reform intensity in Bangladesh, as compared to other countries in the region. They found significant differences across the countries and within the country when reform activity is traced over time. Perhaps an extreme example of how changes in legislation are used to fabricate a reform buzz is the flurry of education laws passed in 1990 in Bangladesh. President H. M. Ershad tried to appease the masses demonstrating against his military dictatorship by having a total of sixteen new laws discussed in the media and subsequently passed in parliament. Some of the changes, such as the establishment of religious schools, were concessions to segments of protesters. In comparison, the Parliament of Bangladesh has passed, on average, less than two education laws, amendments to laws, or regulations per year over the period 1970–2020. A closer examination of the policy content reveals that the laws' scope and budgets in the post-1990 period were significantly bigger than the many changes that the Ershad administration

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[1] The master's and doctoral students produced the studies during my stay as a visiting faculty member at Kobe University (Japan), Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, in the spring semester of 2024.

had launched shortly before he was forced to resign. Yet, breaking down a reform into sixteen different legal documents succeeded, albeit only temporarily, in creating the impression of major improvements at a time when the masses took to the street and called for change.

The disaggregation by country yields a consistent trend: There clearly is heightened reform activity—measured in the number of laws, decrees, and guidelines passed in a year—either shortly before or after, or both before and after, a political shift in government. I have two explanations to offer for why administrative turnover has a salutary effect on reform activity: blame avoidance and stakeholder replacement.

### Blame Avoidance

Our historical account of the SAWA reform in Iceland over the period 1991–2015 clearly shows a peak of reform activity in 2008 and a few months later in 2009 (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024b). The first peak reflects the four new laws passed to finance and implement the school-autonomy-with-accountability reform. Each of the four laws consisted of a bundle of policies tailored to the various levels of education. They were prepared by the then Minister of Education Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir (2003–2009). After four years of negotiations with teacher representatives and other interest groups, she managed to have them passed in 2008, one year before she left office. The second peak in reform activity occurred in 2009, a few months after the SAWA reform package was issued. There are two reasons for the number of regulations immediately following the 2008 change in legislation: (i) the collapse of the financial markets three months after the 2008 laws were passed and (ii) the change in government. The year 2009 was a reform-intense year with one law, two amendments to the laws passed a year earlier, and eleven regulations. The legislative changes in 2009 were carried out both shortly before Gunnarsdóttir's departure and after the arrival of the newly elected Minister of Education at the time (Katrin Jakobsdóttir). As political scientist Weaver (1986) pointed out, politicians are driven by blame avoidance more than by the desire to take credit. It is thus important to disaggregate the policy decisions made in 2009 by the administration to understand which of the decisions were the result of blame avoidance (Gunnarsdóttir's endeavor to leave behind the sector in order) and which represent specifications and modifications of the fundamental reform of 2008, which Jakobsdóttir pursued after assuming office in 2009.

Following up on Weaver's blame avoidance theory, Hood (2007, p. 201) presents three types of blame-avoidance strategies in public management: agency strategies ("find a scapegoat"), presentational strategies ("spin your way out of trouble"), and policy strategies ("don't make contestable judgments that create losers"). It is important to remember that the three strategies are not mutually exclusive. They are brought to bear at any point during political office and tend to be activated shortly before politicians must leave office.

I have already touched earlier upon all three strategies without pinpointing them as blame-avoidance strategies. The outsourcing of expertise to management consultants (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023) and the rise of consultocracy (Gunter et al., 2014), for example, may be seen as an agency strategy for "blame-shifting, buck-passing, and risk transfer" (Hood, 2007, p. 199). In particular, the Ministries of Finance often used management consultants as lighting rods to divert blame away from themselves when they made unpopular decisions such as reorganization or cutting staff. Others also noticed the second strategy ("presentational strategy") of blame avoidance during the early days of SAWA. There is a large body of research on "spin" (Henig, 2008) and "impression management" (Gewirtz et al., 2004) that was mentioned earlier to capture the reactions of decision-makers in the early years of the millennium when they realized that their grand promises of more efficiency and better quality were little more than smoke and mirrors. Finally, the third blame-avoiding approach, identified as a "policy strategy" (Hood, 2007), is related to Boswell's sharp analysis of the unhappy marriage that ensues when targets are used to tie managerial with political purposes. Boswell convincingly documents how the New Labour Government retreated from using targets as a political signaling device. As Boswell puts it, there simply was no public interest, or "There was no airtime for stories about government achievement of targets" (Boswell, 2015, p. 501). This reconfirms the assertion of blame-avoidance theorists that governments shine if they manage to avoid blame more than if they claim credit.

## Stakeholder Replacement

Whereas blame avoiding looms large for outgoing government officials, the preference for self-appointed stakeholders drives incoming policymakers. There are remarkably few studies that explains why reform frequency is pronounced at the beginning of a new administration. Apart from the obvious—new    administrations    making    true    on    their    election

promises—there is also another phenomenon that deserves greater attention: stakeholder replacement. An important side-effect of new government action programs is the replacement of the professional entourage of policymakers. Luschei (2004) coined the term "stakeholder replacement" to describe how the administration of the incoming Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) sought to distance itself from political scandals of the previous administration that had led to the impeachment of his predecessor, President Fernando Collor de Mello. In an act of political boundary setting, Cardoso decided to break with his predecessor's successful school reform program and borrowed a similar program from Colombia (Escuela Nueva) instead. At the same time, the new administration replaced the government officials with new ones who were loyal to the new administration.

Studies of state capacity do differentiate between political versus professional appointees. They further distinguish between political systems that build policy expertise in-house, that is, within the government, outsource it to external experts or management consultants, or appoint ad-hoc committees. Weingart (2003), for example, categorizes six different types of policy advisory systems, some closer to the realm of science and some more attuned to politics. Strikingly, Craft and his associates (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Craft & Henderson, 2023) notice a decline in public service policy capacity in the four countries that they have examined: Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. As a result of the public administration reforms of the past forty years, all four political systems have resorted to hiring managers rather than content or policy experts.

### 1.3   The Salutary Effects of Externalization

The third strand of theories on timing represents my own long-standing research area: the "externalization" to experiences in other countries, other sectors, or to the "world" as a political strategy for generating or alleviating, respectively, reform pressure. This body of research draws on my own experience as a former policy analyst working in the section of multicultural education at a ministry of education.[2] It did not take me

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[2] Prior to my immigration to the United States to pursue academic work, I worked close to ten years as policy analyst and director of the multicultural education policy unit at the Ministry of Education of the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland.

long to realize that in-house policy analysis is highly politicized, especially in education, and even more so in multicultural education. In the briefest time, all our evidence-based propositions for policy adjustments or change became entangled with party politics. A way out of this predicament was a recourse to persons and institutions of authority *outside* the education system. At the time, the Council of Europe strongly advocated for a rights-based approach to the education of minorities. In a similar vein, the UK, with its move from multicultural to anti-racist education, Canada, with its cultural enrichment doctrine, and the US, with the heated debates on structural racism and discrimination, were exemplars of progressive multicultural education worth using as reference points. Ironically, evoking a sense that our country would fall behind the developments in other countries and emulating other countries' policies were perceived as far less political than our own solid, data-based policy analyses and recommendations produced in and for the ministry.

Schriewer introduced the term "externalization" to the comparative education community in 1990 (Schriewer, 1990). Like Schriewer, I drew inspiration from Luhmann's systems theory and selectively adopted a few system-theoretical key concepts to study the policy process (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021a). Unlike systems theory, however, I injected agency and discursive power into my theory mix. This is a noteworthy departure from systems theory as Luhmann finds regulatory science, steering, or "the theory of planning" to be "in a desolate state" (Luhmann, 1997, p. 41) and diametrically opposed to his notion of "self-steering" of the system. He sees systems and not persons or governments as actors. What I found appealing was his analysis of communicative action and the boundary feature (inside/outside) of systems. It resonated very much with my own observation that politicians, as well as their policy advisors, make recourse to external sources of authority (Council of Europe, UK, Canada, US, etc.) as a last resort whenever all else, due to political entanglements and partisan tugs-of-war, fails. In other words, decision-takers activate a quasi-external source of authority as leverage to bolster political support and forge coalitions.

Let's take this thought one step further: If executed by a sufficiently large number of policymakers, the political act of externalization makes it seem as if education systems are converging to the same international model of multicultural education, twenty-first-century curriculum, inclusive education, propagated by intergovernmental organizations such as the Council of Europe, the OECD, UNESCO, or the World Bank. Now,

let's take a step back again and remember that externalization was, in the first place: nothing more than a political strategy to depoliticize policy decisions by making recourse to international standards, best practices, and lessons from elsewhere. At the early stage of policy borrowing, the salutary act on coalition-building is felt. Only after a while do interest groups recognize the political agenda underlying the act of borrowing. Given the active search for feasible external reference points, I labeled this genre of research policy borrowing rather than policy transfer research. I came to learn, however, that the term may be misleading (something borrowed is expected to be returned), and therefore settled with a plethora of related terms such as policy transfer, policy traveling, policy mobility, or policy diffusion research even though these more common terms capture the outcome rather than the process of active borrowing.

Systems theory is not for beginners, to say it jestingly. Therefore, it may be useful to paint the contours of the theory in a few broad strokes and present a few key features that help understand the concept of externalization. The theory is difficult to understand for a variety of reasons. Perhaps most challenging of all, Luhmann (1990, 1995) moves imperceptibly back and forth between three levels of analysis: the macro (system), meso (organizational), and micro (interactional) levels. To comprehend systems theory, readers must also kick the habit of intuitively inserting the adjective "national" whenever they come across the term "the educational system." For Luhmann, there is only one universal system of (world) society and only one universal economy, science, legal, political, or education function system. This is not to downplay differences (sometimes vast) in how these different function systems are organized at national levels. In the function system of education, for example, the normative beliefs of how schools should be organized and what should be taught in them vary widely. Contextual or national differentiation at the organizational (meso) level is acknowledged but ultimately is of little interest to sociological systems theory. Luhmann is concerned primarily with understanding how a system works and how it interacts with its environment, that is, how it deals with the interdependence of systems. Catapulting Luhmann's intellectual project into the contemporary language of actor-network theory, it would be accurate to say that sociological systems theory explores the performativity of systems.

In an attempt to refine his theory but also to make his reading better understood, Luhmann applied his interpretive framework to several function systems of society. His elaboration on the system of education ranked

among his very last writings. The book *Das Erziehungssystem der Gesellschaft* (English: *Society's System of Education*), published after Luhmann's death, contains a succinct three-page summary of sociological systems theory, written by Luhmann himself (2002, pp. 13–15). In the summary, he presents key features of systems, of which the following are relevant for externalization theory: operative closure, communication, functional differentiation, self-referentiality, and production of meaning.

By definition, a system is a closed social entity that constantly enforces and reproduces its boundaries toward other systems. For a system, other systems constitute the environment. In a constant movement between inclusion and exclusion, a system solidifies its identity through boundary setting; that is, it distances and distinguishes itself from other systems. Change occurs because of functional differentiation. In fact, functional differentiation is a prominent feature of modern society. Differentiation also occurs internally, leading to inequality or social and ethnic stratification within a system. Society then consists of functionally differentiated systems, all operating with their own codes, identities, and modes of regulation. The function systems are closed vis-à-vis other function systems but interdependent. For example, even though the education system has its own (socialization) function, its own organizations (schools), its own actors (teachers, students), and its own modes of regulation (until the 1990s, more by moral, religious and legal rather than market considerations), the function system of education both depends on and contributes to the functioning of other function systems. For example, it depends on the financial resources made available in the economic system, and it aims in some countries to turn students into future civic-minded citizens. Since societies are stratified, the education system also teaches students the myth of meritocracy very effectively, making them believe that credentials and hard work determine one's status in society.

Relevant to the study of policy borrowing is the concept of "autopoiesis" (self-reproduction) and "self-referentiality," two key features of systems that result from their operative closure (Luhmann, 1990). At certain moments, systems open up or externalize. In the quest to reduce uncertainty, a system receives and translates demands for change in a self-referential manner. At such moments of uncertainty, it temporarily opens up to other function systems or the generalized other ("the world"), only to then reframe or translate these external impulses in its own code and logic (Luhmann, 1995, 1997). In other words, function systems observe and react to each other but cannot communicate with each other because

each one is bound by its own code or language of communication. Finally, systems are not only self-referential but also self-reflective and self-aware. They can communicate what other function systems expect to hear. The education system, for example, communicates that it is committed to continually supporting the well-being of the child.

There is a strong tradition in organizational sociology to explain all the irrationalities, inefficiencies, and non-predictabilities in decisions taken in organizations that, ever since Weberian's theory of bureaucracies, are supposed to be rational, efficient, and predictable. A Luhmannian perspective starts out with the question of why it is so important for organizations to be perceived as such. As Nassehi asserts,

> What Luhmann offers is the basic premise that all (self-) descriptions of systems are internally generated and, further, that no evidence about what is going on in social systems results from an external point of observations. All (self-) descriptions for Luhmann are part of the described system. (Nassehi, 2005, p. 179)

We try to understand how decisions are communicated and justified in system-theoretically oriented policy studies. The fundamental assumption is that policy decisions are always supported by some and opposed by others. Many scholars in the Anglophone research community tend to turn the legitimacy question into a factual question of how policymakers mitigate insecurity and political risk by resorting to evidence-based policy decisions. A noticeable exception is Eyal, who draws on Luhmannian concepts to explain the crisis of expertise. Paradoxically, the proliferation of evidence-based policy planning has added fuel to the crisis of expertise (see Eyal, 2019). Not only has science become politicized and politics scienticized, but science has also become demystified in front of everyone's eyes:

> [t]he very discourse to expertise increases uncertainty and threatens legitimacy because now the public is witness to controversies between scientists. (Eyal, 2019, p. 102)

In effect, the proliferation of evidence-based policy planning has brought to light that evidence is not more and not less than an "assertion backed by information" (Cairney, 2015; Steiner-Khamsi, 2022). The boom has generated a surplus of evidence to the extent that there is now the challenge of weeding out evidence based on relevance and credibility criteria.

Validation or justification of expertise has thus become the main challenge. In concert with Luhmann, Eyal uses validation in the sense of defensibility to "reassure people that if they would bother to check, they would find that the particular decision was rationally taken and justified, so no need to bother" (Eyal, 2019, p. 88).

As expected from a coherent interpretive framework, many research questions surface, including questions related to timing: at what particular moments do systems externalize, that is, open up, observe, and reference others? Whom or rather what do they choose as their object of observation? What do they do with the observation or reference, that is, how do they (back) translate it to fit their own (system) logic? To sum up, studies on externalization investigate when systems open up, examine which other school systems are selected as reference societies, and finally trace how they project, that is, translate the observation into their own system logic.

The system-theoretical focus on the idiosyncrasies of a system and its national forms of organization brings a fascinating phenomenon to light that at first sight appears to be contradictory. Despite the widespread rhetoric of learning from the "best performing" school systems, there is no universal consensus on why some school systems do better than others on tests such as PISA. On the contrary, there is great variation in how national governments, media, and research institutions explain Finland's, Shanghai's, or Singapore's "success" in PISA or TIMSS. In fact, there is a pattern in these varied, sometimes diametrically opposed, explanations, which is best captured by the term "projection" (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2018; Waldow, 2017). The reception and translation of ILSA results reflect controversial policy issues in a country's own policy context rather than the actual organizational features of the league leaders. "Finnish success" is a good case in point. There is a long list of explanations for why Finnish students do well on ILSAs. Depending on what the controversial policy issue is for which policy actors seek a (internally produced) quasi-external source of authority, Finland's success is attributed to its strong university-based teacher education system, the system of comprehensive schooling with minimal tracking of students, or the nurturing environment in schools where students ironically are exposed to very few high-stakes standardized tests. Meant to pique the reader's curiosity, these questions merely represent a small sample of questions that arise when the concepts of system closure, self-referentiality, and observation/reference are applied to concrete examples from comparative policy studies (see Steiner-Khamsi, 2021b).

## 2    The Lifespan: Explaining Resistance to Change

How can we explain the fact that some reforms are quickly terminated, whereas others become long-lived?

How a borrowed policy is translated into the transfer space affects the lifespan and, as will be discussed in later in this chapter (Sect. 3), the aging process of a policy. The translation may be conceived technically, as a matter of policy design, or institutionally, regarding path dependency. Whereas the first strand of explanations dominates policy science, the latter is actively pursued by historical institutionalists and comparative historical analysts. As with reception research presented in the previous section, questions of legitimacy are at the center stage of studies investigating the translation, local adaptation, or recontextualization of borrowed policies.

### 2.1    The Act of Meaning-Making

The sociology of translation draws on a vast body of knowledge from several disparate research traditions that share an interest in understanding meaning-making, such as comparative literature, feminist theory, science and technology studies, cultural anthropology, and most recently—with its focus on Indigenous knowledge—decolonial studies. Research in these fields shares a cultural interpretative frame that inquires about sense- or meaning-making and helps crystalize the point that translation is more than simply transfer (Friedman, 2009; Callon, 1986). I suggest that we complement the cultural frame with historical-institutionalist methods of inquiry, as pursued in comparative historical analysis (Mahoney & Thelen, 2015) and briefly sketched in Sect. 3. Ultimately, the objective is to understand how education systems translate selectively borrowed global ideas, policies, and practices into their existing local structures, norms, and values.

A fathomable example, unrelated to SAWA, is the translation of student-centered leaching in various local settings. It has been for a variety of societal reasons, such as the global spread of liberal values of individual rights or the growing importance of "actorhood" (Bromley & Meyer, 2015) and its ensuing adaptation in an educational logic and parlance ("better for the child"), the single most successful global export from education systems in the Global North to the rest of the world. Examined in the local context, however, it manifests itself vastly differently.

I had the opportunity to observe the "Mongolization" of student-centered teaching around the millennium, a few years after it was

introduced, with funding first from the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and then from the Soros Foundation Network in the School 2001 project (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). The traditional classroom setting in Mongolia, enforced during the communist times, has a pyramid structure with the teacher in front and three rows of students. Assisting the teacher is one class monitor (Mongolian *angiin darga*) and each class monitor has three assistants, each presiding over one row. Over 80 percent of the class monitors are female, and all of them are students with excellent grades, reflecting the fact that girls outperform boys at all levels of the education system. The teachers in the project partner schools rearranged the student seating: they replaced the rigid three-row hierarchical system with loosely arranged group tables to allow for more student interaction and group work. Strikingly, they kept the system of class monitors intact but creatively adapted it to suit the project objective. They replaced the three student row monitors with five to six group monitors, each directing one of the group tables. Teachers in the seventy-two partner schools enthusiastically practiced student-centered teaching techniques yet adapted or indigenized them to fit the hierarchical Mongolian classroom. Group work—one of the new practices introduced as part of student-centered teaching—did not enhance direct communication between teachers and students in the classroom but increased student-to-student interaction. Teachers communicated with students via the group monitors and vice versa. In other words, the regular students remained at the same place within the pyramid structure but now relied upon group monitors to respond on their behalf. This example from the early days of student-centered teaching meant to illustrate path dependency, that is, how legacies from the past impact how a reform is translated and implemented in the present.

The act of translation is more complex than it may sound at first. Dichotomizing the global and the local falls short of seeing that the "global" is already entrenched in the "local," as the local is not a blank canvas that receives and translates innovations in ways that match the texture of the canvas. Wimmer has coined the term "layered local complexity" to capture his following observation:

> [E]ach local society represents a unique assemblage of templates adopted during previous waves of diffusion, with each wave path-dependently shaping the possibility of future waves—generating what I will call layered local complexity. (Wimmer, 2021, p. 1391)

Similarly, Kruks-Wisner (2022) applies cultural anthropological notions of vernacularization (Merry, 2006) and interlocution (Fox, 2015). To be accessible and "actionable" (Kruks-Wisner, 2022, p. 2386), new ideas, such as borrowed policies, need to be vernacularized or adapted to local institutions and meanings. This process relies on interlocutors who bridge two or more communities and convince local policymakers that a vernacularized version of a traveling reform helps resolve domestic policy challenges. There are numerous studies documenting the resistance to policies that were *tel quel* borrowed from elsewhere without, or with only minimal, local adaptation (e.g., Choi, 2017). The interlocutors are alternatively labeled intermediaries, brokers, boundary spanners, or policy entrepreneurs. They may be individuals or institutions. The networking effect of interlocutors is not to be underestimated. They bridge two realities, spaces, or things that initially seem unrelated by creating equivalencies.

### 2.2   *Compensating Reform Losers*

Bringing the matter of lifespan to close attention helps offset the overemphasis on the timing of when a global reform is selectively adopted. Policy borrowing research has produced many case studies documenting and explaining why, when, and how national policy actors bought into a global education policy. In doing so, it mainly focused on the act of policy adoption as reflected in new laws, regulations, or other types of policy documents. But what happens once a global reform has been adopted? Some of the adopted policies have a sunset clause and are meant to be phased out once the objective has been achieved. Other policies are meant to "stick," stay in place, and eventually become institutionalized. Against all intentions, however, they become short-lived, and their lifespan is shorter than planned. As Colyvas and Jonsson (2011) point out correctly, a differentiation needs to be made between what spreads and what sticks.

Undoubtedly, teachers have been the greatest losers of the SAWA reform. For some scholars of policy design, this could have been remedied with an appropriate design (Howlett, 2019a, 2023). The approach has been criticized for being too pragmatic and technocratic (Le Galès, 2016; Pierson, 2004), downplaying the broader political constellations and power relations at play.

Likewise, a similar kind of criticism in education policy studies reverberates when policies are stripped of their political and social impact and

when questions of how policies, intentionally or unintentionally, create and perpetuate social inequalities are put aside. Turner, Baker, and Jabbar (2024) go so far as to claim the critical approach to education policy research as a stand-alone genre of policy studies. They cluster studies in education policy studies into three groups: (i) policy analysis, (ii) policy process research, and (iii) critical policy research. The first strand intends to inform decisions about policies, interventions, and practices and is closely related to applied and normative "what works" or "best practices" research. The second type of education policy research investigates the policy process and pays close attention to the context in which policies were made. The importance of politics and coalition-building processes constitute major tenets in this cluster of studies. The third genre, finally, according to the authors, "explicitly focuses on power, inequality, and injustice and how everyday people act to challenge injustice" (Turner et al., 2024, p. 178). They then specify the five features of critical policy research, notably, its emphases on investigating policy constructions and their histories; how policies are enacted; how power, resources, knowledge, and unequal voice shape policy and policy processes; the effects of policy on social hierarchies and social inequality, and the resistance, activism, and advocacy in education policy. I agree that the first and second types of education policy research are worlds apart. Policy analyses tend to be normative, oriented toward what "could" and "should" questions. In contrast, the second strand of research is analytical and mainly interested in understanding the policy process and, I would add, policy outcomes based on an investigation of what "is" and "has" questions. Different from Turner et al. (2024), I would not conceive studies of critical policy research as a stand-alone research cluster. Rather, I would differentiate between the theories of the policy process and outcomes that are critical and those that are uncritical of power relations. A critical, analytical lens brings the winners and losers of a reform to the foreground.

What is more, the mix of policies and instruments in a reform package sets in motion a change mechanism that either widens or narrows inequalities between social groups. For this reason, the policy science community has recently directed its attention to the question of policy mixes and instrument constituencies to broaden the narrow focus on policy design (Capano et al., 2020; Bali et al., 2019; Capano & Howlett, 2020). Adopting a critical perspective that takes legitimacy and contestation of reforms into account, we may also ask: who wins and who loses due to a

particular policy decision? How does the policy design bring the losers on board? As a corollary, it is vital to examine to what extent participatory and anticipatory approaches in policy formulation mitigate subversion and resistance later in policy implementation (Bali et al., 2019).

The school-autonomy-with-accountability reform had a detrimental effect on the teaching profession. Teacher unions and teachers' associations have actively resisted critical features of the reform, including the deregulation of pay and working conditions, replacing the tenure system with contractual arrangements, introducing performance-based bonus payments, opening up different entry routes into teacher education, encouraging cheaper, shorter, non-university-based teacher education degrees, and excessive reporting and managerial tasks imposed on teachers (Mathou et al., 2023; Jabbar et al., 2020; Tatto et al., 2017; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

Several policies in the SAWA bundle have, therefore, been abandoned after a short while, reverted, or repurposed. Performance-based pay, for example, requires close, continuous, and documented monitoring of a teacher's performance, including evaluating their students' learning outcomes. In many countries, it was one of the first policies that encountered outright resistance and was either abandoned altogether or the school directors kept the supplementary salary fund and distributed it equally to all teachers on special occasions or at the end of the school year (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024a; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). Teacher unions have played a pivotal role in making decision-takers suspend elements of the reform. In Latin America, where Teacher unions are vocal and influential, accountability policies have been actively resisted or outright rejected (Esper, 2024).

The resistance of teachers and teacher unions has also been picked out as a central theme by SAWA reform proponents. For example, Moe (2011) sees the union as a political special interest group that perpetrates a "politics of blocking" of the reform out of self-interest. He counts on political and technological changes that will weaken teachers' political voice and undermine the Teacher unions' stranglehold on school reform, particularly charter school legislation. More than a decade later, Moe's prophecy did not materialize. Conversely, teacher unions across the US managed to mobilize walkouts and protests to ask for decent pay and work conditions. School-based management, a vital policy of the SAWA package, meant, in practice, deregulation of qualification requirements, work conditions, and pay. Charter schools have been notorious for being exploitative, hiring

teachers who are "less experienced, not unionized, exhibit higher rates of turnover, have less job security, and receive lower pay" (Jabbar et al., 2020, p. 212). Teacher unions have successfully expanded collective bargaining agreements across the country and introduced them in charter schools (Marianno et al., 2023).

There is a fascinating debate on how policies empower some groups at the expense of others. Lindvall (2017), for example, applies a game-theoretical approach to calculate how and how much the perspective losers of a reform need to be compensated, materially and immaterially, in so-called power-sharing political systems to avert "democratic paralysis" (Lindvall, 2017, p. 47). Different from comparing the various social groups (e.g., junior versus senior teachers in the Kyrgyz Republic) that benefited to multiple degrees from a legislative change, he compares the political proponents and opponents of reform. He differentiates between four different costs that decision-takers should anticipate when designing a policy:

dilution costs (when compensation compromises the objectives of a reform), deadweight costs (when compensation is costly to implement), internal costs (when bargaining over compensation requires the expenditure of time, energy, and other scarce resources), and audience costs (when decision-makers pay a political price for being seen to negotiate with their political opponent). (Lindvall, 2017, p. 48)

The compensations for the losers must be feasible and appropriate; otherwise, the "promises of compensation will ring hollow if the losers believe that those promises may not be fulfilled" (Lindvall, 2017, p. 48). Lindvall also demonstrates the political commitment problems (short-term versus long-term) associated with the various compensation strategies. He shows that political polarization, as with periodic government shutdowns in the US, negatively impacts government debt because the ruling party needs to compensate the political opponents for having their own agenda passed.

What applies to compensation strategies in the US does not necessarily hold elsewhere. There is also a burgeoning literature on national policy styles (Howlett & Tosun, 2019) that proves useful in determining the various strategies used to involve potential opponents of a reform. In the Swiss context, for example, pilot projects not only inform policy design but also ensure buy-in at the lower levels of administration and at the school level, including the politically powerful teacher associations and teacher unions.

## 3   Aging: Institutionalization and the Hollowing-Out Effect

I propose to label the trajectory of reform implementation over time aging. The previous section on lifespan explored some of the factors that explain a policy's longevity, as well as its termination or death. In contrast, this section incorporates the temporal lens to understand the incremental changes due to policy borrowing. It is noticeable that most studies on trajectories compare transfer spaces and explain how and why, for example, SAWA policies are translated and implemented in different countries. While spatial comparisons of policy trajectories are invaluable, we gain essential insights into institutionalization processes and outcomes if we compare the trajectory of a policy in one transfer space over time. Methodologically, this implies a longitudinal study of policy implementation and institutionalization.

Scrutinizing aging opens a new angle on phenomena that have amazed many. For example, the "strange non-death of neoliberalism" (Colin Crouch, cited in Beckert, 2020, p. 325) is astounding but explicable when we contemplate processes and outcomes of incremental social change. In line with historical institutionalists, we must acknowledge that a new policy does something to existing structures, ideas, and norms (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). They explain why, subsequently, from a universe of possible trajectories, specific paths were taken. Depending on the variant of the theory of historical institutionalism, path dependency is narrowly defined as an inevitable lock-in or more broadly defined (see Howlett, 2019b). In comparative education policy studies, there is a tendency to embrace the broad version, one that encourages researchers to explore why a global reform resonated and how it was subsequently translated to suit the new context. Typically, historical antecedents are identified to explain why a traveling reform has been adopted and translated in a particular manner. In effect, such a perspective contends that "early events in a path-dependent sequence exert a stronger causal impact on outcomes than later ones" (Mahoney & Thelen, 2015, p. 20).

The historical-institutionalist framework is temporally oriented, paying attention to temporal location and sequence of events. It investigates the incremental changes in institutions over time. This endeavor is compatible with punctuated equilibrium approaches, sketched earlier in this chapter (Sect. 1). Even though a fundamental reform or third-order change implies a significant reorientation in policy goals leading to a flurry of

reform activity, how the reform is implemented and institutionalized, however, follows, as historical institutionalists would say, "an evolutionary pattern characterized by the gradual accumulation of small, incremental changes over a long period" (Campbell, 2004, p. v). It is essential to remember that we can only trace gradual changes if we have a long time horizon in mind. The *longue durée* time frame, prototypical of historical institutionalism and comparative historical analysis, is one of the prerequisites to detecting institutional changes (Hacker et al., 2015; Kreuzer, 2020). SAWA surfaced in the early adopter countries (Australia, New Zealand, UK, US) forty years ago and in many other countries more than three decades ago. The reform was not only adopted long ago, but it has also aged since then, making it an ideal object of study for historical institutionalists. This is an opportune moment to look back and uncover changes that did occur in the education systems because of the reform's aging and institutionalization process.

A few explanations on incremental institutional change may be helpful here. How does change happen? What are the mechanisms of institutional change? The three most frequently identified patterns are drift (Hacker, 2005), conversion (Thelen, 2004), and layering (Schickler, 2001). Hacker et al. (2015) consider drift and conversion "hidden faces of institutional change." Drift occurs when "doing nothing in the legislature often means doing something quite big in the world" because stable policy rules produce shifting policy outcomes (Hacker et al., 2015, p. 193). An example is the value of a minimum wage that governments establish. By not indexing it to inflation, the minimum wage declines in value because the prices rise. Thus, not adjusting policies in a changed environment (here, inflation) produces new policy outcomes. In other words, those who wish to induce change by drift must do whatever is in their disposition to avoid updating an existing policy. In contrast, conversion transforms "an already-existing institution or policy through its authoritative redirection, reinterpretation, or reappropriation" (Hacker et al., 2015, p. 185).

Two examples of the institutionalization outcomes, both from the Ministry of Education of the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland, should suffice to illustrate the two institutional change mechanisms, drift and conversion. The first deals with the non-adoption of two key policies of the SAWA reform: school choice and incentives for private-sector providers to enter the education "market." Yet other policies of the SAWA bundle, such as professionalization of school management, development of school development plans, national curriculum, and so on (see Fig. 1.2), were

adopted and translated into the local context (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024a). Introducing the two key policies would have required a popular vote, a hopeless undertaking, as shown in the failed attempts of the conservative parties to have laws on school choice and privatization passed. It was a change by drift in that the theory of change of SAWA (quality improvement employing competition among schools) was not applicable due to the existing legislative constraints. The preservation of the status quo—retaining primary and lower secondary schools as neighborhood schools, making it financially unattractive for the private sector to operate schools—has had vast, positive repercussions on all other adopted SAWA policies and instruments. The devastating effects on equity, seen in different countries, did not materialize in Switzerland. An example of conversion is abolishing an institution at the district level that used to oversee quality assurance. The greatest changes in governance induced by SAWA were abolishing district-level education authorities (German *Bezirksschulpflege*), establishing professional evaluators, and strengthening managerial capacity at the school level. Composed of elected laypersons, nominated by political parties, the district-level education authorities used to oversee quality assurance. Similar to other countries, the external evaluation of schools was professionalized, rendering them redundant. Formerly revered as a signpost of Swiss direct democracy in which citizens serve as honorary public servants, the Canton of Zurich abolished its district-level education authorities without great fanfare in 2002.

The third mechanism of institutional change, popularized by Thelen (2004), is layering. An element is added to an existing policy or structure to set in motion a slow, incremental institutional change process. In other words, a new policy only partially and slowly replaces existing structures and practices. Still, it adds new institutional layers by repurposing or redirecting what is already in place or by adding or empowering new actors at the expense of other actors. More than drift and conversion, which are more narrowly defined, layering has generated different policy design variants (Capano, 2018). An interesting question is also what exactly has been added (van der Heijden, 2011, p. 14): new actors (referred to as "thickening"), new instruments, or both? Again, examples of layering from the Canton of Zurich include, for example, the addition of standardized tests at critical stages in the school systems. They are still minimal compared to other education systems (e.g., UK or US), yet the already existing, formative student evaluations were complemented with standardized ones (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024a).

As Farrell and Finnemore (2017) pointed out, the layering concept would benefit from expanding its current focus on institutional change and include ideational and normative changes, as proposed by sociological institutionalists. In comparative education policy, a large group of influential scholars[3] has persuasively argued that liberal values (equity, justice, individual rights) have, over a long period, spread globally and transformed organizational structures, created new professions, and established new practices. They drew attention to all three types of change: structures, ideas, and norms. The example of standardized testing in the Canton of Zurich mentioned above shows that SAWA, exacerbated by PISA, generated a mindset and culture of testing even though standardized testing per se did not drastically increase in Swiss schools. The private sector co-opted the global accountability discourse to demand more "objective" evaluation criteria for secondary school graduates, distrusting the performance evaluations of teachers. Still, the rhetoric of accountability and performance monitoring has impacted the belief system of students and parents. Augmented by the media attention given to international large-scale assessments (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS) and a gigantic test industry that produces downloadable apps for school and home use, many parents now believe that their children should be tested regularly to (self-) assess their learning outcome.

Another phenomenon related to the aging of policies has been observed by Morais de Sá e Silva and Porto de Oliveira (2023). They highlight the possibility of policies simply "hollowing out" with age. They examined the global diffusion of two policies—Conditional Cash Transfer and Participatory Budgeting—and found that the interest in the two policies faded away once the first few generations of advocates retired and new political agendas gained prominence. In a similar vein, studies on the economics of policy borrowing in countries of the Global South reveal the phenomenon of temporary layering whereby an innovative element or program is added to an existing school curriculum, teacher education program, and so on, for the duration of external funding (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010).

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[3] The list is long and includes eminent scholars such as John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, Patricia Bromley at Stanford University; Rie Kijima at the University of Toronto; Justin W. Powell at the University of Luxembourg; David Baker and Gerald LeTendre at Penn State, Aaron Benavot at the University of Albany, and Gili Drori at Hebrew University.

Finally, we need to bear in mind that institutions incorporate informal practices if those practices persist over time. Rahmouni and Saizen (2024) examine the "illegal settlements" in the Moroccan cities of Fes and Oujda and discuss their establishment in terms of the colonial legacies left behind by the former French and Spanish colonial administrations. There is a tendency to conceptualize "informality as existing outside of the norms, and it is generally referred to in negative terms as something to be eradicated" (Rahmouni & Saizen, 2024). However, "institutional informality" (Rahmouni & Saizen, 2024) is as influential, or even more critical, than formally approved policies and practices. Cultural anthropologists admonish moving beyond an investigation of formal institutions and networks, as often pursued in policy studies, and also look out for informal ones that are, in some countries, essential to get things done and have requests approved by government officials (Ledeneva 1998; Gupta, 2012).

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# On the Global/Local Nexus and the Late Adopter/Early Adopter Interaction: The Tempo of Diffusion

Chapter 3 explored the global SAWA script's reasons, drivers, and elements from a temporal perspective. As a result, it dealt with the historical context, the projected future, and the sequence of the SAWA reform elements that spread globally. Chapter 4, in contrast, honed in on the "recipient" side, that is, the reception and translation in local institutions. Three temporalities—timing, lifespan, and age—were used as analytical lenses to elucidate when, why, and how a global education reform—such as SAWA— is selectively adopted and subsequently translated in ways to fit the new policy context. This chapter, finally, bridges the two levels of analysis: the global, macroscopic analysis presented in Chap. 3 and the local, meso-scopic look at institutional change, discussed in Chap. 4.

Arguably, empirical inquiries into the pace of reform dissemination are under the intellectual purview of diffusion of innovation research. Developed in the 1960s in agricultural science (Rogers, 1962), it first experienced a revival in social network research and small-world research (Watts, 2003) and, more recently, in policy design and implementation science (Howlett, 2019). Watts popularized the epidemiological metaphor to illustrate phases of slow and rapid diffusion. The idea of contagion has been used to explain how illnesses, rumors, and fashion spread and how innovations or, in our case, how a global script spreads over time across many education systems. Only a few education systems are "infected" by a reform buzz in the early stages. They tend to make explicit references to lessons learned from other education systems, especially

those they seek to emulate. At a later stage of explosive growth, however, the reform is globalized or de-territorialized, and the traces of the "original" are erased.

A few researchers examined in their dissertations the local policy context to understand why a global education policy—conditional cash transfer (Morais de Sa e Silva, 2017), quality assurance mechanism in higher education (Lao, 2015), or per-capita financing (Janashia, 2015)—was adopted at a particular moment and whether there was any policy learning or interaction between late and early adopters involved in accounting for the global spread. Most research questions seek to understand the causal sequence within a social system. Catapulted to a global level with 195 countries, we may ask analogously: Does global diffusion accelerate depending on who the early adopters are? What critical mass of education systems is needed for a tipping point or for a point of no return after which a reform diffuses indomitably and exponentially? What do late adopters of a reform "learn" from early adopters? How does feedback affect the traveling global script? Finally, what does "burnout" mean regarding a reform wave? I suggest that we discuss the tempo of diffusion in terms of (i) the temporal location of the reform adopters, (ii) reference countries used for policy learning, (iii) accelerators of global scripts, and (iv) feedback between the global and local levels.

## 1    The Temporal Location of Reform Adopters

The lazy s-curve, shown in Fig. 5.1, is a hypothetical model of global diffusion. The differentiation between three different stages of diffusion—slow growth, explosive growth phase, and burnout phase—and between early adopters (pioneers or countries that joined during the slow growth phase) and late adopters (joined toward the end of the exponential growth phase) is crucial to the model.

At the early stage, policymakers explicitly reference the early adopters whose reform package they seek to emulate. A good example is the transatlantic transfer of school choice between educational systems in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early 1990s (Whitty, 2012). Externalization by an ever-growing number of countries makes adopting reforms, including controversial ones, more palatable. During the explosive growth phase (the middle phase as depicted in Fig. 5.1), more systems adopt a reform, as traces of transnational policy borrowing disappear. Once a critical mass of late adopters has borrowed a particular reform, the
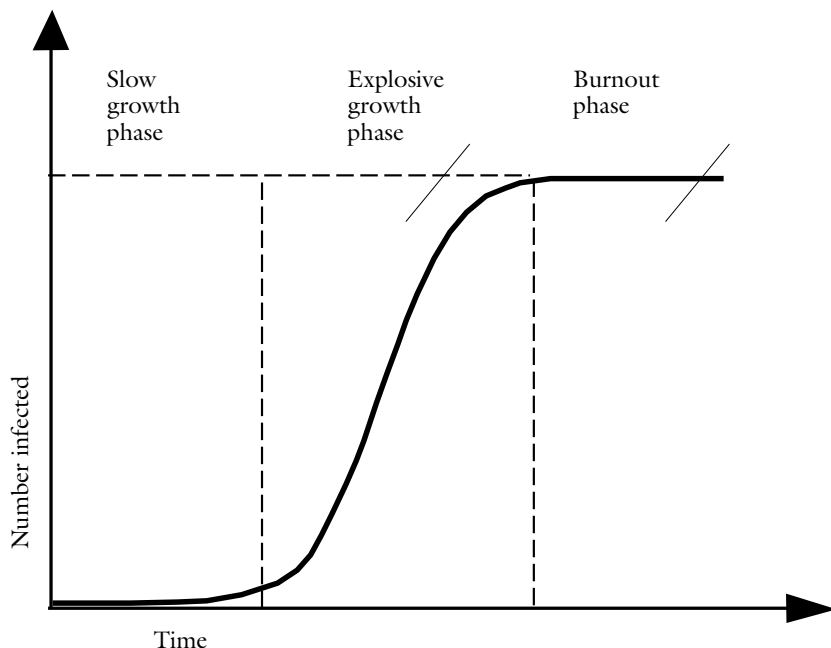
**Fig. 5.1** The lazy s-curve

geographic and cultural origins vanish, making it easier for decontextualized and de-territorialized versions to spread rapidly. At this stage, global dissemination occurs. During the explosive growth phase, some policymakers opt only to adopt the rhetoric but not the actual reform. They do so because they fear being left behind and labeled as backward and out of touch with global trends. Late adoption should be interpreted as an orientation statement made by policymakers to denote their geo-political affiliation with a larger, modern educational space. The "global speak" occurring at this stage is primarily symbolic, with few consequences for policy action at the national level or for policy implementation at the institutional level (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p. 147). Thus, a traveling reform gains traction with age: the older it is and the more it has been circulated among educational systems, the more likely it will be further exported or disseminated. Tolbert and Zucker (1983) propose a two-stage model in which early adoption occurs for technical reasons, followed by adoption by symbolic reasons.

Driven by a sense of disbelief and curiosity, policy borrowing researchers have examined for the past thirty years why such a controversial reform—in particular SAWA's theory of change whereby competition among schools presumably improves the quality of education—diffused globally (Halpin & Troyna, 1995). They are not alone in this intellectual project. Colvyas and Jonsson (2011) also wonder why inefficient innovations diffuse. Like the system-theoretical externalization thesis explained earlier, Colyvas and her associates (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011; Anderson & Colyvas. 2021) highlight the symbolic role of late adoption. Policies that went global exhibit a sense of legitimacy *as if* only best practices spread. Thus, referencing a global policy helps justify a reform domestically, even if the reform in question is only vaguely related to what has traveled the globe.

## 2    CONTAGION OVER POLICY LEARNING

Similarly, Lee and Strang (2006) confirm the myth-building surrounding traveling reforms. They are seen as successful reforms only because many countries adopt them. They found that scientific evidence on the efficiency or inefficiency of the reform plays a minor role in the diffusion process. They examined public sector down- and upsizing trends in twenty-six countries from 1980 to 1997 and found that efficiency considerations did not drive adopters. Political affiliation mattered to some extent, but during the explosive growth stage, the public sector reform spread across partisan divides. The NPM agenda of downsizing government was propelled in Canada, the UK, and the US during the period of conservative, neoliberal government. In contrast, the same policies were overseen in Australia and New Zealand by Labor parties.

Reorganizations in the public sector, such as the size of government, are directly related to political agendas and the state's role assigned by the political parties in power. Before NPM (1965–1991), during the period of the social welfare state, public-sector employment as a percentage of the working-age population doubled from 6 to 12 percent. According to the study by Lee and Strang (2006), the downsizing trend only started in 1994. The net change in the size of government turned negative across all OECD countries. This was the period during which each OECD member state had to report to OECD's Public Management Committee (PUMA), renamed to Public Governance Committee in 2004, on whether and how they carried out new public management and procurement in their country.

Lee and Strang (2006) also examined causal diffusion effects, whether adopting the NPM reform a few months or years later led other governments to initiate the same overhaul. Concretely, they examined whether there is a "follow the leader" pattern, that is, signing on to the reform after the most potent OECD member state (the US) instated downsizing legislation (Lee & Strang, 2006, p. 894). Furthermore, they investigated "vicarious learning" (Dobbin et al., 2007), whereby adopters observe their peers and learn from their earlier experience with the reform. The hypothesis of peer-based emulation assumes that countries will influence each other more when they see themselves as part of the same group regarding language, income level, or trade relations. Only countries that are seen as comparable are seen as reference societies and used for emulation. The concept of policy learning or vicarious learning implies that late adopters do not emulate the reform from their peers if they observe the negative outcome of the reform implemented by the earlier "risk-taking" adopters.

The authors find a differential contagion rather than a policy learning effect. This means that the reform spread regardless of the reform's outcome in the early adopter states. States that joined the reform movement during the exponential growth stage were primarily interested in information, reinforcing their neoliberal beliefs that big government was inefficient and wasteful. They turned a blind eye to studies documenting the opposite, notably, the detrimental effects of the new public management reform. The authors concluded that downsizing was, for political reasons, contagious, but upsizing was not. Against all expectations, late adopters were open to reforms that yielded adverse outcomes in their peer countries or the lead adopter (the US).

Whereas the US could be considered the lead country, or "patient zero" in COVID-19 language, in OECD countries, Russia used to be the pioneer in school reform during Soviet times and, in a few post-Soviet countries, also in the first decade after the collapse of communism. Janashia (2015) examined for the period 1998–2014 whether the "follow-the-leader" pattern, found by Lee and Strang for OECD countries, also applied to the post-Soviet region. Figure 5.2 shows the year in which several post-Soviet states adopted per capita financing in education.

Figure 5.2 shows that Russia pioneered, together with Estonia, the introduction of per-capita financing, one of the critical policies of SAWA, in 1998. Post-communist Mongolia (not shown in Fig. 5.2) adopted the policy in the same year. Most likely, the diffusion curve reflects three causal
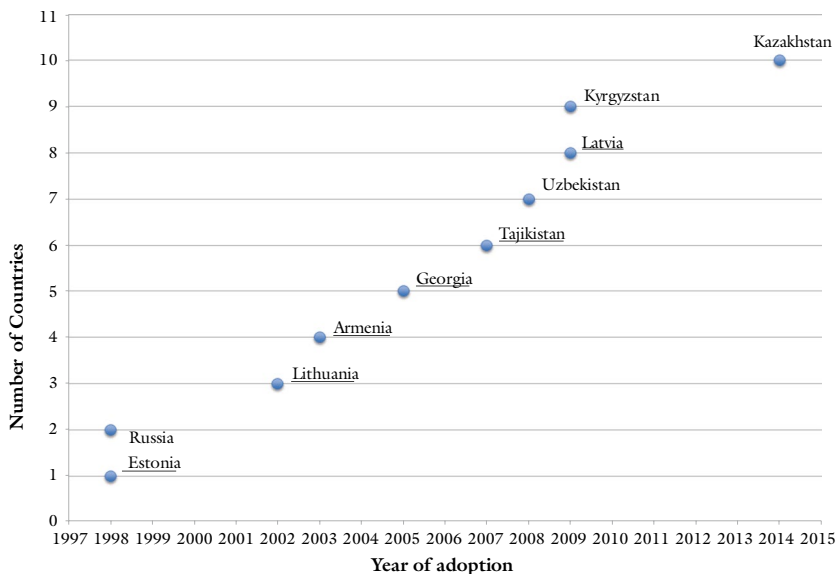
**Fig. 5.2** The adoption of per-capita financing in the post-Soviet region, 1998–2014. (*Source*: Janashia (2015, p. 52))

diffusion effects: follow-the-leader for those countries that at the time considered Russia their peer and primary reference society, OECD influence (the three Baltic states joined the Council of Europe 1993–1995 and the European Union in 2004), and impact of external financial assistance. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the World Bank promoted and funded per capita financing and hired two companies, first Abt Associates and then Socium-Consult, to design the policy for the health and education sectors.

## 3    Drivers and Accelerators

International policy networks, particularly the OECD and the World Bank, played a major role in diffusing first NPM in all public sectors, and later SAWA in the education sector. International organizations use various networking channels, such as social media, platforms, or conferences (Halligan, 2015) and more coercive measures, such as treaties,

agreements, loans, and grants, to diffuse the institution's portfolio of policies and best practices. The OECD promoted the theory of change of the NPM reform and pioneered new instruments for designing and monitoring it. The OECD instruments encompassed, according to Alawattage and Elshihry (2017), a market-type assessment framework, a government regulatory model checklist, a systematic framework for performance measurement, dashboarding, peer reviews, and international comparison.

As the drivers of the reforms, the OECD and the World Bank provided legitimacy or, so to speak, the international stamp of approval for the global diffusion regardless of the actual outcomes of the reform at the country level. Expressed topologically, the two drivers have internationalized a reform that started out as a national reform. They symbolically authorized the reform, made it transferrable and scalable, and thereby accelerated its diffusion. Besides packaging SAWA as part of a larger New Public Administration bundle, the two organizations also gave the reform a "global form" that is suitable to be moved from one place to another (Prince, 2010, p. 169): "an object with universal validity in both places through its situation in self-referential technical systems." The feature of policy bundle or "assemblage" is an integral part of what makes a reform global and transferrable: the adopters may select bits and pieces from the package, drop what they consider unsuitable, and reassemble the policy mix in ways that are attuned with their political agenda. The policy assemblage approach is very much in concert with research on selective policy borrowing and translation (see Savage, 2019).

It is important to remember that intergovernmental organizations such as the Global Partnership for Education, OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, and other development banks have governments as their members or, in the case of development banks, as their shareholders. Their governance structure enables them to act and speak on behalf of governments. Their policy advice reverberates even though some members, more than others, have a great impact on shaping the substance of the advice.

For NPM, the OECD's PUMA committee (established in 1990) and the Maastricht Treaty of 1993 were instrumental in accelerating the diffusion of the reform. The twelve European countries that signed the Maastricht Treaty agreed in Article 104c (1) that the member states "shall avoid excessive government deficits" over the next few years (cited in Lee & Strang, 2006). The agreement was meant to avert financial risks when introducing the new joint currency. That new currency, the Euro, was subsequently introduced in 2002. PUMA saw itself as the custodian of a

neoliberal management reform that would reduce state deficits by improving efficiency and shrinking the state apparatus in OECD countries. For the two powerful OECD governments, the UK and the US, NPM and privatization were interconnected. As mentioned earlier, Henig, Hamnett, and Feigenbaum (1988) noticed that delegations from twenty countries were visiting the UK, the early adopter of NPM and privatization policies. The new procurement laws encouraged outsourcing public goods and service and the adoption of a demand-supply type of regulation. The market-type regulation was espoused in the influential PUMA report, conspicuously entitled *Managing with Market Type Mechanisms* (OECD, 1993). All along, rational arguments for NPM (the reducing-inefficiency argument), school autonomy (the school-knows-better argument), and finally school-autonomy-with-accountability (schools are responsible for student learning) accompanied the three reform waves, even though each one of them was entrenched in partisan politics of various kinds.

What OECD's PUMA was for rich OECD countries, UNPAM (United Nations Programme in Public Administration) was for poor countries: an international network of governments promoting NPM. UNPAM was established in 1953 (resolution 723 (VIII) of the UN General Assembly) to recognize the critical role of public administration "for the promotion of economic and social development." For the next few decades, UNPAN engaged in the capacity-building of government officials. However, at its 12th meeting in 1995, it widely embraced NPM as the vehicle for delivering more efficient and effective public service at a reduced cost. The resolution of that meeting reiterated the traditional approach (capacity-building). It complemented it with the new strategy of "strengthening the partnership of the public sector with the private sector and civil society, as well as providing an enabling environment for private sector activities" (Bertucci, 2018). Like the Third Way approach in OECD countries, described earlier, UNPAN attempted to bring back the state as an active enabler of outsourcing of public goods and services, promoter of public–private partnerships, and eventually as the agent in charge of quality assurance of public *and* private providers of public goods and services.

As Bertucci (2018) points out, this was at odds with the Washington Consensus, established in 1989 by the World Bank, IMF, and the US Department of Treasury. The Washington Consensus consisted of a ten-point program for developing countries that promoted privatization,

deregulation, and trade liberalization as reform pillars that would allow economic growth and alleviate poverty. For the Washington Consensus, the state was an obstacle to achieving those goals, and state regulation should make way for market regulation. UNPAN was influential for all UN organizations, including the World Bank.

The World Bank had, at the time, and continues to have a dilemma. It subscribes to the Washington Consensus and structural adjustment policies—reducing public expenditures and increasing revenues—yet lends money to the government. Loan and grant administration requires a strong, functioning, and non-corrupt state. A Friedmanian notion of complete deregulation or Ronald Reagan's doctrine that the best state is no state is anathema for intergovernmental organizations such as the World Bank. In 1997, the Bank entitled its World Development Report, *The State in a Changing World*. The state's vision was that of a facilitator of economic growth, a terminator of poverty, and a protector of the environment. Efficiency and cost-effectiveness in carrying out these tasks were writ large, and so was the expectation of a close-knit network governance between the state, private sector, and civil society. The report presents the two-pronged strategy of the World Bank to bring back the role of the state as an efficient and effective state on the one hand and as a facilitator of private sector involvement on the other:

> All these considerations point to a two-part strategy to improve the state's ability to enhance economic and social welfare. The first task is to match the state's role to its existing capability to establish the institutional rules and norms that will enable the state to provide collective goods and services efficiently. The second is to reinvigorate the state's capability through rules, partnerships, and competitive pressures outside and within the state. (World Bank, 1997, p. 24)

The first part of the strategy, rendering public services more efficient and cost-effective, was in line with NPM's managerial principles. Hood contends that NPM was diffused globally precisely because it was presented as a purely managerial reform stripped of party politics (Hood, 1991; see also Common, 1998).

More than any other intergovernmental organization, the OECD and the World Bank shaped and disseminated NPM principles across all sectors, including SAWA, specifically in education. However, they promoted the reform for slightly different reasons: the OECD promoted a

quasi-market mechanism to enhance efficiency in the public sector and therefore reduce "waste," and the World Bank, in turn, coupled the outcomes of NPM—reduction in civil servants, atomization of ministries into accountable, functional units, and privatization—with its larger mission of structural adjustment. Every loan-recipient country was subject to the Bank's Public Expenditure Review (PER), in which economists reported on whether the state apparatus was indeed minimized and private sector contracts for public goods and services maximized. In the education sector, the Bank's Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys were, for a while, widely used to track down financial leakage from the central to the school level and to make an argument for school-based management (see Koziol & Tolmie, 2010).

How do we operationalize tempo and acceleration? Grzymala-Busse defines tempo as the "amount of change per unit of time: d/t, where d = distance or change and t = time interval" (Grzymala-Busse, 2011, p. 1269). For her, acceleration is a derivative of velocity with the only difference that the vector of direction is determined; that is, the accelerated change needs to occur in the same direction. Applied to diffusion research, we should expect to find a peak in the adoption of NPM policies shortly after 1993, when the influential OECD PUMA report was released and the Maastricht Treaty was put into effect. OECD country after OECD country introduced, within a short time interval or at a fast pace, NPM reform. In other words, the NPM picked up speed after 1993, when a significant number of OECD countries joined the reform wave. In the lazy-s curve, depicted in Fig. 5.1, the accelerated pace manifests in the exponential growth stage when many countries join a reform within brief intervals.

## 4   HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL FEEDBACK

An important question is whether the global script changes as a result of feedback from adopters. Does positive feedback accelerate and, vice-versa, does negative feedback slow down diffusion?

In Sect. 2 of this chapter, I showed that contagion trumps policy learning when it comes to adoption. Countries adopted the traveling reforms regardless of how controversial, inefficient, or ineffective the reforms were in the early adopter countries. Does the same apply to SAWA enactment or policy design at the national level? As shown, the late adopters join the reform wave for symbolic reasons because these come across as "legitimate

reforms" propelled by intergovernmental organizations. However, how they implement them is not only path-dependent but indicative of the prior policy experiences of their peers. They learn to avoid mistakes made by the "at-risk adopters" (Lee & Strang, 2006), those implementing a reform first. The inverse applies, too, suggesting that peer learning occurs in both directions. Using the example of new accounting practices that diffused globally, Posner (2009) and Newman (2017) show that early adopters adapted their practices based on what they observed in late-adopter countries. In sum, the outcome of diffusion varies even though the process follows a pattern of contagion. As shown before, it is essential to differentiate between the process and the outcomes of diffusion.

The concept of a reform package is crucial to examine the horizontal feedback effects from early to late adopters. Ultimately, the question is: what exactly diffuses and what does not? It is noticeable that the SAWA theory of change (competition among schools improves the quality of education) was dropped by late adopters even though several policies and policy instruments of the package were adopted. The theory of change was highly politicized and promoted a replacement of state regulation with market regulation. This theory of change did not sit well with governments that were reluctant to deregulate and allow for wholesale privatization in the education sector. Put differently, the policy narrative changed over time because the borrowed policies were translated and repurposed by late adopters. In effect, the element of the package that would have slowed down the diffusion—the neoliberal ideological *superstructure (German: Überbau)* reflected in SAWA's early theory of change— was vernacularized and gave way to alternative theories of change underlying SAWA's bundle of policies and policy instruments. In Europe, the early script of accountability writ-large persisted in some countries, but new models worthy of emulation emerged. In Europe, for example, a Nordic regional script emerged that builds on a strong interventionist state (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) and, more specifically in education, on trust rather than control of teachers. After leading the league of top-performing school systems, Finland became a leader of that model for others to emulate. The alternative theory of change, directly opposing the neoliberal one pursued by the early adopter, was that school autonomy empowers teachers and school directors and enables them to develop study plans that correspond to their students' needs and interests (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024).

Several attempts have been made to cluster governments' adaptation to NPM (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Painter & Peters, 2010) or test-based accountability (Verger et al., 2019) based on countries' similarities in terms of political culture and tradition. Painter and Peters (2010) identify five different traditions or path-dependent ways of adopting NPM. Verger et al. (2019), in turn, differentiate between three different types of rationales for adopting test-based accountability (TBA): (i) NPM marketizers: adopting TBA to expand market competition and choice (mostly Anglo-Saxon countries as well as Chile), (ii) Neo-Weberian states: governance instruments travel to continental Europe (central and Nordic countries in Europe), (iii) Napoleonic states: the partial and uneven adoption of governance reforms (Southern European countries). Verger et al.'s point about path-dependent translations or variants of test-based accountability is well taken. Indeed, countries tend to select countries as reference societies with which they share a common space, that is, with which they share regional affiliations (e.g., Nordic Council of Ministers, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Pacific Regional Education Framework, Caribbean Community) or which they perceive as being similar or comparable. Other scholars from the Barcelona Autonomous University research group also drew their close attention to implementation. They reviewed 133 empirical studies worldwide that examined the side effects of performance-based accountability (Levatino et al., 2024). They clustered countries into two groups (countries with low-stakes versus high-stakes accountability reforms). They found significant differences in terms of the side effects on teachers (including their well-being), pedagogy (e.g., teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing), students (e.g., management of student diversity), organizational matters, and community relations. A differentiation by national pathways and policy styles is indispensable and provides invaluable insights into why a global reform resonates locally and how it is subsequently translated and implemented.

However, for diffusion researchers, the absence of the time dimension and horizontal policy learning is glaring. As Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, p. 19) posit, "there is a language issue" in that all leading or early NPM adopters were predominantly anglophone (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US). The later variants of NPM or test-based accountability emerged a few years later. They considered the scathing criticism of how the early variants were enacted, leading to undesirable outcomes. However, the proliferation of various country- or group-specific variants accelerated the velocity with which the reform spread. The

more variants that existed, the lower the threshold for a government to adopt the traveling reform. Concerns of fidelity with the initial reform idea dissipate with every new country selectively adopting and translating the global script.

The nascent research on policy feedback builds on the observation that "policies are not only effects but potential causes" that shape politics and policy development over time (Béland et al., 2022, p. 1; see also Pierson, 2004). The same applies to policy instruments: they take on a life of their own and have their following (Simons & Voss, 2017). Policy age and policy learning are tied through feedback effects. Therefore, our analyses should not end with how a reform package was implemented but how it changed over time because of feedback. Feedback effects open additional strands of research. Béland et al. (2022) investigate both types of feedback: those that reinforce and those that undermine an existing reform. I suggest we examine the causes of an adopted policy for subsequent policy development in a given country and the global script itself.

Concretely, we would be well advised to expand the relational perspective that permeates diffusion research to investigate the national/global nexus. It is more customary to explore the global/national nexus—how global actors drive developments at the national level. Similarly, diffusion research tends to focus on horizontal policy transfer between countries. It would also be worthwhile to consider vertical transfer by zooming in on the national/global nexus: Do policy outcomes at the national level impact the global reform discourse of intergovernmental organizations? To say it bluntly, do the OECD and the World Bank learn? Have the two drivers of the global script adjusted their script based on feedback from their members or shareholders, respectively?

Arguably, the two intergovernmental organizations tend to preserve the policies and policy instruments that their organizations subscribe to. However, they continuously adjust, repurpose, and expand their scope to consolidate and amplify their position as a trusted reform advisor (OECD) and lender (World Bank), respectively. The World Bank, more than the OECD, drives its reform priorities on autopilot, and the only feedback that it incorporates for further operations is internal feedback, obtained either based on its evaluations (World Bank's Independent Evaluation) or commissioned Randomized Controlled Trials. The OECD, in turn, solicits input from its data analysts and managers at the country level. Compared to the World Bank, the OECD does acknowledge that lessons can be learned horizontally, that is, from other countries. It pairs policy analysts

from different countries to facilitate peer exchange and learning (Ward & Mouthaan, 2024). In contrast, the World Bank operates vertically in that it transfers its portfolio of best practices, compiled at the global level based on commissioned evaluations and research, only with slight contextual adaptations, to its "clients," the recipient governments (Seitzer et al., 2023). In the end, however, the feedback does not change the organizations' broader reform agendas. Instead, the two organizations continuously update and adjust their agenda to comply with the constantly evolving aid architecture (World Bank) and public sector management reforms (OECD).

Three examples of the World Bank's vertical approach and self-referential feedback loop may be illustrative here. They show how the Bank learns, but it learns self-referentially, based on its own evaluations and changed policy priorities within the Bank, not based on feedback from the country level.

The first example shows how the Bank continuously updates its policy instruments and policies in its lending activity to reflect changed priorities within the Bank. Hossain (2023) examined the World Bank's lending for diffusing Education and Management Information Systems (EMIS) in low and lower-middle-income countries (LMIS). He determined the period of EMIS diffusion to be 1998–2016. In total, the Bank implemented 311 EMIS projects during that period in 99 countries. In some countries, there were multiple EMIS projects either because they served the national and sub-national levels or because previous projects failed (computers were not upgraded, the trained staff left, etc.). The diffusion accelerated in the 2010s, reaching a peak in 2013.

Many ministries of education resist EMIS because they fear a loss of financial resources provided by international donors or their Ministry of Finance. On the one hand, the government needs to demonstrate with data that the targets and benchmarks have been met to receive tranches or final payments of the loans or grants. On the other hand, statistical information is used by the Ministry of Finance to calculate the education budget. There are sometimes huge gaps that yawn between the enrollment statistics of the Ministry of Education (collected at the sub-national level) and the Ministry of Finance (received from national statistical offices), creating disputes, which, predictably, the Ministry of Education tends to lose. Regardless of the resistance to expanding the country's EMIS, the World Bank forcefully funded the diffusion of data infrastructure in the form of EMIS at the country level. As Hossain (2023) points

out, the bottom-up information-gathering feature of EMIS (schools collect the data and pass it on to the sub-national or national level) strengthens the school and the sub-national levels of government. Thus, it aligns with the World Bank's larger reform agenda of school autonomy (school-based management) and devolution of decision-making authority from the central to the sub-national level (see Hossain, 2022). I may add here that the human resource section of EMIS provided invaluable information for the Bank to project where staffing cuts should be made.

In addition to these three broader reform agendas—school-based management, decentralization, and structural adjustment—the Bank modified its justification for building data infrastructure over time. The causes were not so much related to the (negative) feedback from the country level but changes at the global level, particularly the changed ideas about effective aid and good governance. Since the early years of the millennium, World Bank-funded sector development projects require baseline data, mid-term targets, and benchmarks regarding key indicators established by the World Bank. Statistical information is also important for financial planning and management because the Bank promoted, as part of SAWA, per-capita financing, which uses enrollment figures to calculate the budget. The narrative about the importance of EMIS changed over the course of EMIS diffusion (1998–2016) from collecting data as a management tool (baselines, targets, benchmarks) to performance-based management (using standardized student tests to assess the outcome of a reform) to the accountability of education stakeholders, including teachers, school directors, and local government officials through transparent decision-making processes using EMIS data (e-government). In other words, the World Bank doubled down on the unpopular EMIS by continuously adding new purposes and justifications for building a data infrastructure.

During the second stage, the Bank utilized EMIS in three ways: to improve project management and reporting to international donors, advance the broader agenda of promoting outcomes-based regulation, and encourage non-state actors to enter the education market. In addition to documenting enrollment, dropout, completion, and other basic statistical measures, EMIS should include learning data. Hossain's regression analysis shows that the chances of adding national student tests are significantly greater if a country has EMIS in place. The availability of learning data also allows the Ministries of Education to assess the performance of state and non-state providers of public schools. In the most recent iteration of the policy narrative on EMIS, the Bank shows the importance of

data for good, transparent governance. In sum, the World Bank actively promotes the use of data for a wide range of purposes and target groups. It has incentivized decision-makers to use EMIS data for more efficient resource allocation and management and schools, teachers, and communities to enforce test-based accountability measures in order to improve learning outcomes (Abdul-Hamid, 2017). Most recently, it has collected and shared data to boost citizen engagement and social accountability (CESA).

The datafication of education through EMIS was one of many unpopular reforms where the World Bank was unmoved by resistance and negative feedback. The second example deals with the Bank's continued promotion of contract teachers. Even though the Bank adapted the policy narrative over time to reflect changed policy priorities within the Bank, it actively propelled and funded the controversial policy. Initially instated during the period of rapid educational expansion in low and lower-middle-income countries, the World Bank and IMF advised governments to employ contract teachers to keep up with the significant demand for teachers (Duthilleul, 2005). Typically, contract teachers receive lower salaries, have lower professional qualifications, and have temporary appointments that need to be renewed. During the SAWA diffusion, the World Bank promoted contractual teaching appointments as the alternative to unionized, tenured teacher posts that could not be held as accountable as the vulnerable, underpaid, and underqualified contract teachers due to their secured position.

In her study of two states in India, Terway showed the path-dependent pattern of how two Indian states adopted the controversial contract teacher policy (Terway, 2016). The Government of Kerala undermined the directive and only hired contract teachers in exceptional cases. In stark contrast, the Government of Madhya Pradesh repurposed the concept of contract teachers and hired them for entry positions into the teaching profession. They could advance and change employment status if they acquired the necessary qualifications. By the early 2010s, 68 percent of all government primary school teachers in Madhya Pradesh were recruited as contract teachers, compared to 3 percent in Kerala. What is interesting for diffusion researchers is that funders of a traveling reform that diffuses globally (here, the World Bank) continue to do so despite the mixed outcomes of the reform at the national level. Thus, the feedback loop between the national and global levels is broken.

Finally, the last example documents how the World Bank is indeed adapting its lending priorities based on internal studies and debates, even if it means divesting in what it had previously supported. Díaz Ríos and Urbano-Canal (2021) demonstrate how the World Bank changed its policy priorities in diametrically opposed directions over a period of sixty years. In the 1960s, when it collaborated with UNESCO, it promoted technical-vocational education and training (TVET) at the lower secondary school level. It shifted funding from TVET to primary education based on the World Bank's rates of return analyses, and finally, in the new millennium, it again recognized the importance of lower secondary schools for the country's economic growth. However, this time, lower secondary school was meant to improve primary completion rates and build a strong foundation for TVET, which, according to the World Bank's new assessment related to the fast-changing labor market needs, should start only at upper and not at lower secondary school level, as previously pursued. The authors show that the Colombian education ministry objected to these policy priority changes because, against initial reluctance, they had convinced their local stakeholders of the importance of strengthening TVET. The ministry came up with all kinds of creative solutions to undermine the new policy direction promoted by the Bank. Instead of having new separate TVET institutions that would be visible to all, the ministry established TVET tracks within regular secondary schools. By 2011, 3197 out of 13,604 public schools integrated such vocational programs into their school.

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# Analyzing Time: Implications for Theory and Practice

What have we gained from incorporating the temporal dimension into policy transfer research?

In Part III, I argue that all seven temporalities are essential to consider. They complement each other and, if combined, are likely to advance scholarship on policy transfer and, more broadly, research on the policy process and policy outcomes.

CHAPTER 6

# Conclusions

In this concluding chapter, I compare the seven temporalities of policy transfer discussed in Part II. What have we gained by systematically applying the temporal dimension to understanding policy transfer? Drawing on the most recent fundamental reform, school-autonomy-with-accountability, what false assumptions may we correct, and what new insights do we offer? Finally, how does the intellectual preoccupation with time affect our choice of interpretive frameworks or theories?

## 1 THE TEMPORALITIES OF THE TRAVELING REFORM: A COMPARISON

Arguably, it is inconceivable to think and, even less, to study policies without considering spatial and temporal dimensions. However, the more we scratch at the surface, the more we realize that simple "where" and "when" questions will not capture the process, drivers, and outcomes of policy transfer. The spatial dimension encompasses place, proximity, spatial positionality, scale, level, and new concepts, such as "local globalness" (Hartong & Nikolai, 2017), accentuating spatial demarcations' fluidity. Similarly, the temporal dimension involves considerations of the present, the future, the sequence, timing, lifespan, age, tempo, and possibly other temporality features.

I briefly sketched a few features of the spatial dimension (Chap. 2) that are necessary for the comparative, transnational, and global perspectives pursued in this book. Among them is the differentiation between place and space and the spatial divide between countries of the Global North and the Global South. They inhabit different spaces. Peripheral economies with a long history of exploitation and colonialism, the low and lower-middle-income countries share the same aid-dependent space with their own set of rules, institutions, and practices. At the opposite end of the spectrum are countries seen as reference societies. In a world system soaked in inequality, the school reforms in countries of the Global North are curiously put on a pedestal for other countries to emulate, regardless of whether the reforms worked. Policy transfer's spatial dimension awaits further exploration in more detail.

In this book, I tried to delve into greater depth concerning the temporal dimension of policy transfer. Summarizing the explanations in the previous part of this book (Part II), Table 6.1 presents the seven temporal aspects in terms of the research questions and the new insights that such a temporal lens has to offer.

### 1.1    Temporalities That Explore the Development of the Global Script

The macro-level analyses afford us to understand in which historical context, with what expected (future) prospects, and in which sequence the global SAWA script developed.
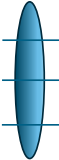
**Present**  It is a given that the historical context matters, explaining why a new reform wave—one that eventually became known as SAWA—emerged. As indicated by the three dots in the visualization of Table 6.1, what other events coincided that helped generate problem awareness? Rapid educational expansion challenged many governments in the 1960s and 1970s. They had to respond to a vast demand for schooling during a period in which they experienced a financial crisis. I labeled the main government strategies to cope with the lack of financial resources but also the limitation of managerial capacity as follows (see Part II, Chap. 1): Eating from separate pots, funding a few at the expense of the masses, cost-sharing with parents, doing more with less and doing it better. Decentralization, community involvement, and charging parents (low) fees date back to the era of rapid educational expansion and were not, as

**Table 6.1** The seven temporalities of policy transfer: An overview

| | Temporality | Description | Illustrations on a time axis | Exemplary research questions | Summary of findings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Three temporalities that explain the development of the global script (macro-level analyses)** | | | | |
| 1 | Present | Historical context at the time | | Which policy options existed at the time to cope with educational expansion? | Governments experimented with different models to satisfy the rising demand for education under conditions of scarce financial resources and low managerial capacity |
| 2 | Future | Projections into a time to come | | How have the two main drivers – the OECD and the World Bank – convinced governments of the reform? | The quasi-market regulation promised efficiency and achievement gains |
| 3 | Sequence | Temporal order | | How did the SAWA reform evolve over time into a global script with its own theory of change, a bundle of policies, and preferred policy instruments? | SAWA developed in the following sequence: 1) Deregulation, privatization & marketization 2) School autonomy (including choice) 3) School autonomy with accountability |
| | **Three temporalities that explain the reception and translation of the global script at the institutional, local level (meso-level analyses)** | | | | |
| 4 | Timing | Moment | | What was the political constellation at the time in a country that explains the receptiveness for the reform? | Policymakers tend to externalize at moments of protracted conflict to secure a quasi-external validation for their policy decision. |
| 5 | Lifespan | Long/short duration | | How is a borrowed reform translated into the local context and how does that translation affect the policy design? | Reforms are translated in path-dependent ways, that is, prior structures, ideas, and norms affect how the various elements of a global reform package are recontextualized. |

**Table 6.1**  (continued)

| 6 | | Changes over the lifespan | | How does the institutionalization process of a borrowed reform unfold over time? | | All changes occur incrementally. An enacted reform changes over time as a result of implementers' adaptations, rejections, and undermining. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | **The tempo of diffusion examined against the backdrop of the global/local nexus** | | |
| 7 | Tempo | Long/short duration between two events indicating the velocity with which events occur |  | What factors slow down or accelerate the diffusion of a traveling reform? |  | 1. The diffusion accelerates with every new country adopting the reform. 2. Reforms that are seen as legitimate (supported by OECD and the World Bank) are contagious and diffuse at a fast pace regardless of the (negative) outcomes in early adopter countries. 3. Horizontally in terms of peer interaction, late adopters observe and learn from the early adopters when enacting the adopted reform. 4. Vertically in terms of global/local interaction, the World Bank and the OECD continuously expand and repurpose their programs in response to internal evaluations and changed priorities within the organization. The World Bank's reform priorities, in particular, are unmoved by feedback received from the national level. |

commonly assumed, introduced with NPM. However, the prospect of "doing more with less and doing it better" was new. It was soaked in a neoliberal ideology that believed in the superiority of market regulation over state regulation.

**Future** The role of international organizations, particularly the OECD and the World Bank, in pushing and, in the case of the World Bank, for funding the fourth strategy ("doing more with less and doing it better") is not to be underestimated. The architects of NPM were economists, and their counterparts were Ministers of Finance, both in the rich OECD countries and in the aid-recipient countries served by the World Bank. They promised and projected, with calculations, future efficiency and achievement gains that would afford governments to reduce public expenditure while at the same time expanding public services, such as increasing access to education. The first international agreement in education, Education for All, was signed with that promise in mind. The NPM theory of change is best illustrated in the publications of OECD's PUMA committee (OECD, 1993a, 1993b). Introducing deregulation and quasi-market mechanisms in the public sector will increase efficiency and reduce waste. As asserted by many, NPM was indeed a managerial reform. However, it also entailed—equally important to consider—a procurement reform. Contracting was established as a new policy instrument to outsource the provision of public goods and public services to the private sector. As part of the procurement reform, line ministries were therefore charged with defining the core functions, deliverables, and expected outcomes in their sector, a necessary task because the closed circuit, whereby the state both provides and pays for public goods and services, was dismantled. This was the beginning of the shift from input to outcomes regulation, predating the era of standardized testing in education. Thus, NPM went, from the onset, hand in hand with choice and privatization in all public sectors, including education.

**Sequence** A sequence analysis is indispensable for tracing the changing role of the state that brings to light the interdependence between the education sector and other public sectors. Table 3.1 summarizes the four fundamental public management reforms of the past six decades, each characterized by a different role assigned to the state and with a different reform goal: equal opportunity (1960s/1970s), autonomy (1980s/1990s), quality (2000s), and transparency (2010s/20s). Strikingly, each new

reform justified its new goal and objectives with the limitations or the failure of the previous one. At the same time, there is continuity in some features of the last reform(s) that managed to change values, institutionalize new structures, and establish hard-to-change norms. The current overhaul, tentatively labeled the E-Governance Reform, relies, more than the three previous public administration reforms, on public opinion to regulate the sector. Over a period of sixty years only, the type of accountability changed from state accountability (1960s/1970s) to market accountability (1980s/1990s), to standards accountability (2000s), and, most recently, to public or social accountability (2010s/2020s). Over the last two decades, we see a continuous datafication process that started in the era of the interventionist state (school-autonomy-with-accountability). At the same time, we see a discontinuity in the theory of change. The new change mechanism puts public opinion and direct interaction between the state and citizens, made possible by technology and social media, in the foreground.

A sequence analysis helps to correct the misconception of SAWA as a neoliberal reform. The first NPM-inspired phase was neoliberal in orientation. However, it is more accurate to designate the ideal-type, end version of SAWA (autonomy *with* accountability) as a centrist reform that attempted to reinstate the state's authority, albeit for a new reality: to encourage public–private partnerships and, at least minimally, regulate the market. To be more exact, it was politically to the right of the middle on a spectrum with Milton Friedman's vision of complete market regulation with vouchers, choice, and privatization to the right and the totalizing social welfare system vision to the left. The latter expected from the state to both fund and run public schools and prohibit businesses to open schools for profit. In the end version of SAWA, private sector involvement was permitted and encouraged if the businesses upheld state-established quality standards. Establishing accreditation and accountability measures were not a conservative move but rather an attempt to shield public education from sub-par private providers that flooded the "education market" in the wake of the previous neoliberal reform wave. For reasons explained earlier, OECD's PISA and TALIS and, to a smaller extent, IEA tests (TIMSS, PIRLS) and the ever-growing number of regional and national large-scale student assessments (Kamens & Benavot, 2011), popularized test-based standards accountability. The OECD gave governments the authority to adopt SAWA as a legitimate innovation. Test-based accountability standards diffused globally at breathtaking speed in the early years of the

millennium once PISA gained traction. Even though the OECD continues to rely on traditional global governance tools, notably international agreements and country reviews, the PISA test has overshadowed all other attempts to exert influence at the national level (Bloem, 2016; Seitzer et al., 2021). The Directorate for Education and Skills at the OECD has continuously expanded its geographic sphere of influence and the types of tests offered to member and non-member countries (Addey, 2017; Gorur, 2016).

Granted, the sequential presentation of the last four public administration reforms and their translation into the education sector (see Table 3.1) somewhat simplified the historical legacies that impacted how new reforms were conceived, received and adapted. Wimmer (2023) coined the compelling term "layered legacies" to capture the multiple histories that affect how institutions respond to, translate, and implement change based on past developments. He proposed that

> [w]e see history as a sequence of stages, each of which modifies the possible legacies left by the previous stage and shape the possibilities of future legacies through path dependency. From this point of view, we can think of history as a process of layering, with previous layers shaping the structure of later layers and later layers determining whether older layers continue to influence the present. (Wimmer, 2023, p. 2)

For Wimmer, not all past events carry the same weight in shaping the reception and translation of current events. Some are more consequential and long-lasting than others. Additionally, historical layers interact and affect each other by either reinforcing, amplifying, or neutralizing previous experiences and legacies. In my sequential analyses, I have given equal weight to the four public administration reforms that fundamentally changed the state's role in inducing and steering change: from the Welfare State, Entrepreneurial State, and Interventionist State to the Engaged State (Chap. 3, Sect. 3). However, NPM thinking, rigorously pursued during the period of the Entrepreneurial State (1980s/1990s), may still reverberate to this day. It would be wrong to assume that with each reform, the previous legacy—shaping the reception and translation of new reforms—is simply replaced by a new legacy.

Wimmer's affinity for historiographic methods aligns well with Falleti's "sequential theory of decentralization" (2010). She presents five case studies of decentralization reforms in the education and health sectors of

Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, differentiating between administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization. Depending on the sequence in which these various types of decentralization reforms developed, decentralization resulted in a weakened central government and increased power for provincial governors and municipal mayors. Past events leave behind different legacies, depending on the sequence in which they were introduced.

Noticeably, the health sector is often used as a comparator case for the education sector. Chabbott (2015), for example, demonstrates that the health sector implemented its international agenda (Health for All) more rigorously than the education sector (Education for All). While the expectation to learn from the health sector should be encountered with a grain of skepticism due to the democratization of expertise mentioned earlier, an investigation of another kind of cross-sectoral transfer seems to be missing: Comparing the design of public administration reforms with how they were translated and implemented in the various sectors. Have the designers and implementers of public administration reforms learned from the early adopters and adapters in line ministries?

There is anecdotal evidence of cross-sectoral policy learning. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic made it abundantly clear that the privatization of public hospitals and cost-benefit calculations had led to a disastrous situation in sparsely populated districts and regions. Similarly, the deregulation in the education sector in the 1990s, coupled with choice and a school voucher system, had left schools in poor neighborhoods in a far worse situation than before because those students ending in these newly created dumping grounds were from families that depended on having their children enrolled in nearby schools. The question thus becomes: What impact did negative feedback from line ministries, here health and education, have on the public management reforms propelled by Ministries of Finance? While there is a fascinating body of research that investigates feedback from late to early adopters, and vice versa, or from the local to the global level (see Chap. 5), we need more studies that investigate sector-specific feedback on public management reforms.

## 1.2   Temporalities That Explore the Reception and Translation in Institutions

A macroscopic analysis of the global script, summarized in the previous section, does little to further our understanding of why exactly institutions

have bought into the script, how they selectively adopted and translated it, and how they designed its implementation. The much-needed meso-level institutional analyses require an in-depth examination of the policy context. That context explains why the promises of the script resonated at a particular moment, why only some features of reform were adopted, what the adoption meant in the local policy context, and how its institutionalization process evolved over time. Matters of timing, lifespan, and age of a reform fall into the institutional or meso-level analysis category.

**Timing** We know from the vital work of Bromley, Kijima, and their associates (2023) that the period of highest SAWA reform activity worldwide was 1992–2008. The exponential growth of countries introducing legislation in line with the reform was during that period, as shown in policy documents assembled in the World Education Reform Database. The longitudinal observation of the WERD research group—whereby the burst in neoliberal reform activity followed a period of reform inertia—hints at a punctuated equilibrium, amply discussed in policy studies. However, only looking at the aggregated data does not give any insights into when and why countries bought into the reform. It is necessary to carry out, country by country, a qualitative case study that illuminates the momentum (illustrated with a single dot in Table 6.1) in which there was a receptiveness for the script. The multiple streams framework comes immediately to mind because it is one of the most frequently used interpretive frameworks to identify windows of change. It is necessary, though, to catapult the framework into the twenty-first century and consider the role of information technology both for creating collective problem awareness and collective political action. Similarly, the surplus of information and information silos challenge the reliance on "evidence" underlying the framework. In the digital age, we are witnessing a rise of institutional policy brokers, representing both intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, that couple the problem stream with the policy stream. Organized into large networks, they engage both in agenda-setting and policy formulation.

Nevertheless, punctuated equilibrium theories force us to examine the policy context at the moment of borrowing. Pragmatic reasons, such as blame avoidance for outgoing administrations or stakeholder replacement for incoming administrations, should not be underestimated as factors that enhance an opportunity for change.

Our group of policy-borrowing researchers leans on the system-theoretical concept of externalization to show that reference to a global script or to earlier adopters occurs at a moment of protracted policy conflicts. On purpose, I had labeled that particular way of analyzing the timing issue as an investigation into the politics of policy borrowing and, particularly in the context of aid-dependent countries, the economics of policy borrowing. What political and economic gains derive from policy transfer? At center stage are questions of how policymakers justify their decisions, minimize public contestations, and reduce the sense of insecurity associated with every change. The qualitative comparative policy analyses demonstrate, as shown earlier (Chap. 4, Sect. 1.3), that externalization to experiences in other countries or global scripts has temporarily, and only temporarily, a depoliticization and coalition-building effect in the local context. Perhaps in no other area more than on the issue of timing, is the fluidity between the global and local so apparent: at moments of public contestation, policymakers make recourse to "global forces" *as if* they were an external source thereby helping to authorize or provide an international stamp of approval for contested domestic reforms. Once they depoliticized their decisions by referring to experiences from elsewhere or best practices propagated by global actors, they "domesticate" the reform by making it look home-grown.

The scholarship on timing counters the passive notion implied in the terms transfer, policy mobility, or diffusion and replaces them with the active construction of policy borrowing. Borrowing is a willful political and economic act carried out when there is a political need for a quasi-external authorization or, in the case of financial dependency, an economic need to comply with the reform priorities for which a grant or loan has been given.

**Lifespan** What spreads and sticks are not identical (Anderson & Colyvas, 2021). The investigation of timing zoomed in on factors that explain adoption and reception, paying close attention to the lifespan of a reform endeavor to elucidate the translation and adaptation of a borrowed reform into the local context. As signaled by the oval shape in Table 6.1, lifespan deals with the duration of how many years a reform element is in effect. The question of whether a borrowed policy is short or long-lived is, in great part, a matter of how policymakers translate the reform into the institutional context and how they cope with resistance to change. As a corollary, all inquiries into the lifespan of a policy are sensitive to the path-

dependent patterns that emerge when policymakers translate and recontextualize the reform elements into existing domestic structures, norms, and values. Unsurprisingly, culturalist approaches investigating the vernacularization and local meaning-making of a global script have proven invaluable for understanding the lifespan, durability, or stickiness factor. Policy transfer may occur rhetorically for symbolic reasons, such as the country's association with a broader international space. Mongolia, for example, entertained the idea of choice and vouchers during the first years of the millennium only because the two policies provoked associations with freedom and democracy and signaled a clear departure from its undesired communist past. In a sparsely populated country that, at the time, only had three urban areas—the capital Ulaanbaatar, Darkhan, Erdenet— the enactment of choice and vouchers would have been entirely infeasible (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

**Age** Unlike lifespan, where we are interested in the start and end point of an enacted reform, the temporality of policy age draws attention to discrete points over the duration or lifespan of a reform. To illustrate the point, Table 6.1. shows three time periods—marked with vertical lines on the time axis—during which the observations of the reform enactment are carried out: for example, at the early stage, middle stage, and toward the end stage when a reform is either fully implemented or, on the contrary, is hollowed out over time. Whereas lifespan attends to the stickiness question (does a reform ever get enacted and, if it does, for how long?), age invokes scrutiny of the institutionalization process, an intellectual terrain of historical institutionalists. They trace different processes of incremental change, including hybridization, drift, conversion, and layering. The acknowledgment that reforms age or mature in a slow and lengthy process of institutional change includes the possibility that the reform may, at any point during these incremental changes, hollow out or even drop its *raison d' être*, that is, its initial policy goal, and replace it with a new policy goal. SAWA is a good case to show how policymakers continuously replaced the rationale for a fundamental reform over time, either because earlier justifications became politically contested or the outcomes were undesirable.

In Iceland, as mentioned above, two ministers of education with the same party affiliation radically changed the rhetoric of why deregulation and school autonomy at upper secondary schools were adopted and subsequently enacted. The first minister (Björn Bjarnason, 1995–2002) held office during the height of the NPM reform and invoked the neoliberal,

managerial rhetoric at the initial stages of the reform. A few years later, the new minister from the same party (Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, 2003–2009) dropped the unpopular rhetoric and embraced instead a pedagogical rationale for the same reform package: providing upper secondary schools the autonomy to offer study programs that are tailored to students' interests and needs.

### 1.3    *Tempo and Tipping Point*

Chapter 5 draws on the diffusion of innovation theories to assess what we may gain by investigating the velocity with which a global script diffuses. Table 6.1 shows, in an exemplary manner, five adopters of a global script. The script spreads slowly but picks up speed with the third adopter because the time interval that laps between adopters diminishes.

Diffusion models assume a lazy-s curve pattern of spread with early adopters (the five Anglophone countries, addressed repeatedly) at the slow growth stage. A tipping point is achieved when a large group of countries adopt the reform in short time intervals. This period is labeled the exponential growth stage. At some point, a global script burns out or reaches the point of saturation only because the universe of possible adopters has enacted the script in one way or another.

The temporal dimension, in turn, sheds light on a few phenomena that the other six temporalities cannot illuminate. It investigates, for example, the temporal location of the adopters. Did it matter that the early adopters were from rich, anglophone countries (with Chile being the exception)? Is there a follow-the-leader phenomenon that we may observe? Many studies document the importance of the OECD and the World Bank as drivers and accelerators of the SAWA reform. There is a temporal relation between the Maastricht Treaty (1993), which obliged European countries to lower their state deficit in preparation for the introduction of the joint currency Euro, the OECD's influential PUMA report (OECD, 1993a, b), and the exponential spread of NPM. In countries of the Global South, the Washington Consensus (1989) and the United Nations Programme in Public Administration (UNPAN) triggered and sustained the reform, as reflected in the 1997 World Development Report (World Bank, 1997).

NPM spread like wildfire in the mid-1990s. A few years later, the same occurred in the education sector, first with NPM-inspired governance reforms and then with reforms emphasizing quality improvement (Overbey, 2024). The tempo increased toward the end of that decade, as

evidenced by the reform in the last few years before the turn of the millennium, shown in the World Education Reform Database (Bromley et al., 2023). The OECD and the World Bank provided the necessary legitimacy and helped mobilize financial resources for countries to adopt the global SAWA reform package. At the exponential growth stage, the reform became contagious and was adopted for symbolic reasons. By that time, many translations or variants of the script existed, making it easier for countries to join the reform that has, over time, become everybody's and nobody's reform.

Two questions arise: First, have governments learned from the experiences of other governments (horizontal policy learning), and have global drivers and accelerators learned from feedback from their local counterparts (vertical policy learning)?

The issue of horizontal learning may be further broken down in terms of the temporal location of the adopters: do late adopters learn from early adopters, that is, do they learn to avoid mistakes or mimic countries with successful outcomes, respectively? Vice versa, do early adopters correct their course of reform institutionalization by observing those who joined the reform wave later? While the adoption is contagious during the stage of exponential growth, the enactment of the reform is, to some extent, informed by feedback circulated about other countries' implementation processes and outcomes, regardless of whether these countries were early or late adopters.

An inspection of the global/local nexus enables us to assess whether SAWA's two drivers and accelerators, the OECD and the World Bank, incorporated feedback from their local counterparts. We found that the World Bank, more than the OECD, relies on internal knowledge sources. In search of the best universal solutions, the Bank funds expensive RTCs and program evaluations that help them make a case within the Bank itself to fund the same program, with minor modifications, worldwide. We labeled this self-referential mode of feedback "vertical policy learning" (Seitzer et al., 2023) because the Bank rarely changes its reform priorities based on countries' needs and feedback. Instead, it refines, repurposes, and expands its mandate in its client countries, as the examples of the Education Management and Information System (Hossain, 2023), contract teachers in the two Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Kerala (Terway, 2016), or secondary school reform in Colombia (Díaz Ríos & Urbano-Canal, 2021) showed.

## 2    Ways of Seeing, Ways of Knowing

In social research, we typically focus on one research question and one interpretive framework. The book, in contrast, focused on one analytical category: time. The one-question, one-interpretive framework design proved to be too restrictive once we dissect time into seven temporalities. Each temporality tends to generate its own research questions, summarized in Table 6.1. As I will present in the following, some interpretive frameworks are better suited than others to address the research questions.

Despite my affinity to sociological system theory, loosely interpreted, I learned to realize that more than one interpretive framework is needed to address the broad spectrum of research questions raised in policy transfer research. Utilizing the time dimension as an analytical tool to detect and explain the complexity of policy transfer was an intellectual experiment. Very soon, it became abundantly clear that I needed to draw on several theories to illuminate the processes and outcomes of policy transfer. More than one theory is required to see and explain the issue's complexity. There are too many blind spots if one commits to one theory or interpretive framework alone. In my study of the seven temporalities of policy transfer, I drew inspiration from the scholarship produced in neo-institutionalist theory, historical institutionalism, diffusion of innovation research, public policy studies, sociological systems theory, and several strands of critical theory.

While *neo-institutionalist theory*, manifested in the Stanford University School of Sociology of Education (John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, Patricia Bromley, Rie Kijima, and many others), formidably traces global developments over a long period of 20, 50, or even 100 years, and explains why, from a multitude of beliefs and practices, one has gone global (e.g., Boyle et al. 2015; Velasco, 2023), it simply is not attuned to understanding the reception and translation of international trends. Their analyses remain strictly at the macro level. However, let's remember that examining and understanding global trends is not a small undertaking. It requires a Big N-Many variables research design and a comprehensive databank such as the World Education Reform Database, with over 10,000 policy documents collected from almost every country worldwide.

As the name indicates, *historical institutionalism* (Thelen, Pierson, Mahoney, etc.) is sensitive to the time dimension. The historical institutionalist framework is suitable for understanding the differences in how countries adopt and enact reforms based on past experiences and existing

structures. The sequence of events or, in our case, the sequence of reforms explains why and how a reform is enacted. Uncovering path dependency and explaining incremental institutional change are their outstanding contributions. Moreover, some of the same scholars also engage in comparative history, enabling them to show similarities and differences between countries (see Fioretos, 2017). From the perspective of international relations scholars, however, they do not sufficiently consider the role of global actors as "teachers of norms" that help diffuse some ideas at the expense of other ideas globally (Finnemore, 1993; Farrell & Finnemore, 2017).

The strength of *diffusion of innovation research*, in turn, lies in tracing how ideas spread globally. The transnational perspective is beneficial for understanding the drivers and accelerators of traveling reforms. Diffusion researchers are sensitive to the adopters' temporal location and order. Are they early or late adopters? Do they join a reform movement during the period of exponential growth? Their location and order on a timeline of diffusion explains to some extent whether they are the architects of a reform or, as late adopters, simply hijack the label of a globally diffused idea (e.g., "accountability") so as not to fall behind the trends observed in other countries. The theory also reminds us that we must differentiate between the process and outcomes of policy transfer as "bad ideas" spread, too. Similarly, questions of feedback and policy learning surface and are ideally suited for tackling with a diffusion lens.

But what exactly spreads? Neither diffusion researchers nor the other two interpretive frameworks—neo-institutionalists and historical institutionalists—can answer this question. Here, *policy studies* lend themselves to reflecting on the tools of government. I have used my differentiation between "reforms" and "policies." There are small and big reforms. The big, fundamental ones also introduce a new policy goal with its change mechanism or its own new theory of change.

Furthermore, these fundamental reforms are more than just one policy. Instead, fundamental reforms consist of a package with their theory of change, bundle of policies, and preferred policy instruments, as manifest in the SAWA reform package. Political coalition-building may occur at the level of the theory of change (e.g., conservative political parties that pushed for autonomy and market regulation; centrist political partners, together with progressive elements, that advocated for accountability measures), individual policies, or policy instruments. For scholars in policy studies, a policy is more than what materializes in a policy document. A government may induce change by providing grants and other financial

incentives, introducing performance-based management in all state institutions, down to the school level, etc. Often, a policy document only captures legislative or regulatory changes and not all other practices introduced by the government. The government—whether it is at the central level, sub-national level, municipal level, and whether it is the legislative or executive branch—is not a closed institution. The agenda for reform is, nowadays more than before, driven by non-state actors, notably civil society and the private sector, and feedback to reforms is nowadays continuously given through public opinion collected in a solicited or, in the case of social media, in an unsolicited manner. Social movements, professional associations, and non-governmental organizations are not only agenda-setters. They are also social entities that hold governments accountable for policy enactment.

*Sociological systems theory* includes several key concepts that enable us to understand the workings of social systems. The fact that systems are operationally closed but cognitively open means that each system (including the education system) is trapped in its language and logic. Yet, it observes and translates the language and logic of other systems (legal, finance, health, education, etc.) and the world system into its own operations. How did NPM's performance-based management translate into the education system? At what moment is a system externalizing, that is, referencing other social systems? In my loose interpretation of social systems theory, I adopted the concept of externalization, reference society, and the semantics of globalization as key concepts introduced into comparative education by J. Schriewer for understanding the rationale and process of reception and translation in policy borrowing. The answers to these why and how questions have preoccupied me for the last two decades (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Equally important is the insight that references to best practices, globalization, or international practices occur when there is a need for additional justification for policy decisions. In other words, "global forces" are not out there, but they are internally induced under specific policy constellations when there is a need to generate legitimacy, build coalitions, and mobilize financial resources.

Finally, *critical theories* that consider the existing inequality and the reproduction of inequality are essential for understanding the time dimension in policy transfer. Dependency theory, political economy, world systems theory, and decolonial theory represent some of the most frequently used interpretive frameworks sensitive to power relations in policy transfer processes. The anthology of theories in comparative and international

education subsumes them under the headings Dependency Theory and World-Systems Analysis (Griffiths, 2021) and Political Economy (Shields & Kameshwara 2021). A critical perspective entails rejecting the status quo as something that is "normal" and beyond contestation and change (Esposito, 2017).

The inequalities that need to be addressed are much more ubiquitous, granular, but also covert than what we may think at first. The inequalities persist not only between the countries of the Global North and the Global South, Anglophone countries, and the rest of the world, but also between the various government structures. The Mega-Ministry of Finance was not only the driver of NPM and, in extension, SAWA, but it is also the main counterpart of development banks. Unsurprisingly, an OECD-administered international large-scale student assessment (PISA) is much more influential in the political system than an assessment carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education, coordinated by education research associations. In some countries of the post-Soviet region, for example, the Prime Minister's Office has its own office for educational affairs, sometimes competing with, and in fact, overpowering the Ministry of Education charged with the same tasks. There also exist vast inequalities between policy actors, both official and non-official. For example, foundations have a tremendous impact in the US as backstage policy advisors. In aid-dependent countries, UNICEF has in recent years, for better or worse, become the interlocutor between the Ministry of Education and the international donor community.

The interpretive frameworks, briefly reiterated here, lend themselves to exploring the seven temporalities of policy transfer. Of course, the theories are much more complex and comprehensive than those narrowly applied to policy transfer research. The reviews are meant to show how each theory fills a gap left behind by other explanations. The different theories complement each other because each one has its own way of seeing and knowing.

## 3 Time in Policy Transfer, Time in Education

Research on the spatial and temporal dimensions is burgeoning in policy studies. Inquiries into traveling reforms, in particular, are predisposed to space and time considerations. After all, the object of study is how and why a policy pops up later, or was transferred, from one space to a new

space. The space in question may be a topological place, the global space, or another policy domain.

The spatial turn in education policy studies has been noted by Gulson et al. (2023) and substantiated with several key concepts and case studies in the edited volume of Edwards, Verger, McKenzie and Takayama (2024). Of course, insecurities of what to make of the political reconfiguration of space and time in the age of digital platforms and technologies have accelerated the proliferation of such studies (e.g., Decuypere et al., 2022). In their fascinating study of organizational change in the age of digital economy, Stark and Vanden Broeck reflect on how the new topology, in which users and producers are intertwined, has engendered a new type of management (Stark & Broeck, 2024). Different from bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic forms of management, "algorithmic management" does not rely on, nor perpetuate, a hierarchical form of governance and, therefore, also pursues a different kind of accountability. In stark contrast to the proliferation of thought-provoking studies on the spatial dimension, I can only see faint contours of a temporal turn in education policy research that is about to occur. Lingard and Thompson (2017), for example, urge educational researchers to reflect on non-linear and relational notions of time. Their attempt to reinsert time into the sociology of education and, more specifically, in education policy studies is meant to counterbalance the great attention to spatial issues.

Nevertheless, the study of time in comparative education policy is semi-orphaned if compared with the temporal turn that the adjacent fields, notably political science, international relations, and public policy studies, experienced over the past few years. The proliferation of publications with "time" in the title is remarkable, such as Pierson's influential book *Politics in Time* (2004), Fioretos' edited volume *International Politics and Institutions in Time* (2017), or Morais de Sá e Silva and Porto de Oliveira's award-winning journal article "Incorporating Time into Policy Transfer Studies" (2023).

In this regard, numbers speak for themselves: Liao et al. (2022) counted the publications since Abbott wrote his first piece on sequence analysis in 1983 (Abbott, 1983): Ten texts were published on sequence analysis during the decade of 1980–1989, 65 for the decade of 1990–1999, 408 for the decade of 2000–2009, 2320 for the decade of 2010–2019, and already 1080 over the first 18 months of the last period that the authors examined (January 2020–June 2022). The same exponential growth is noticeable for other theories or methods that address the time dimension in one way

or another. For example, Kingdon's multiple streams framework addresses the timing issue, and Thelen's (2004) layering concept deals with incremental institutional change over time. Both contributions have experienced, according to Cairney (2021) and Capano (2018), an inflationary usage to the extent that the concepts have become malleable and conceptually imprecise.

Given the lively debate on the temporal dimension in our adjacent fields, the question becomes: how does the preoccupation with time in the comparative study of education policy differ from what others have already discussed so eloquently? In this book, I have highlighted seven temporalities that shape how one may think about policy transfer, policy mobility, or policy borrowing. However, the number seven should be understood in a biblical sense. The seven temporalities are not exhaustive. Policymakers use time in a variety of ways to justify policy decisions.

Three examples from South Africa, Mongolia, and Argentina come to mind here. First, the essence of time—assigning a chronological order to events—is sometimes flipped when policymakers retroactively reinvent the genealogy of a reform movement. They go back in time and rearrange the chronological order of events. Spreen (2004) showed how the proponents of outcomes-based education in post-Apartheid South Africa distanced themselves from the controversial reform import from Canada and the US. Instead, they appropriated the reform retroactively and made it seem like a home-spun reform.

Second, tinkering with time is part and parcel of the politics and economics of policy borrowing. For example, the practice of promissory futures, enlisted by international organizations as an instrument of anticipatory governance (see Chap. 3, Sect. 2), does, in effect, invert the temporal sequence commonly assumed in theories of the policy process. Concretely, rather than first determining what the problem is for which solutions are sought, the inverse occurs: the universal solutions of international organizations "chase [local] problems" (Béland & Howlett, 2016). What if a problem is genuinely local and does not resonate at the global level because only a few (rather than many) countries experience the same challenge? Twenty years ago, Mongolia experienced two significant challenges that, from a global perspective, were seen as anomalies and treated as anathema. The first was inverse gender discrimination (males rather than females experienced discrimination), and the second was nomadic education. That is, the need to provide flexible forms of schooling that consider the large number of nomadic pastoralists who, due to the

seasonal requirements of animal husbandry, had to relocate once or twice per year with their families, including their school-aged children (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). The nationwide net of well-maintained boarding schools collapsed in the post-communist era because international donors were unwilling to support them financially for various reasons. There were no global scripts or policy narratives available for the local problems of Mongolians. As a result, Mongolian policymakers had to speak the language of the donors to be heard. They had to redefine their two "problems" to match available global solutions: they reframed the male dropout problem as a dropout problem of poor children who abandoned school because of the high opportunity cost associated with schooling. Gender was replaced with class considerations. While they managed to secure external financial assistance to reduce the dropout problem of poor children (the majority of whom were boys), the policymakers' efforts to maintain the rural infrastructure, including schools with boarding facilities, were idle.

Finally, a third example of how current assumptions of the temporal dimension need to be challenged is Esper's study on how performance-based accountability in the form of standardized tests was introduced in Argentina (Esper, 2024). One of the fallacies in policy studies is the assumption of continuous development. Therefore, qualitatively oriented researchers propose identifying the causal chain of events using case study methodology. This is easier said than done. Sometimes, the chain is ruptured or, to formulate it in temporal terms, time is interrupted. The causal chain of events is not as continuous and linear as commonly assumed, even if the sequence of events has been meticulously traced. A good case in point is the introduction of standardized testing in Argentina, examined by Esper (2024). There was earlier a debate at the national level about whether standardized testing should be introduced nationally. After much back and forth, the proposal was dropped. Only years later, when a well-known Argentinian social scientist joined the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the debate rekindled. Eventually, the municipality of Buenos Aires adopted standardized testing as part of the plan to improve performance-based accountability promoted by UNESCO and the OECD. Esper's study shows how the introduction of performance-based accountability was temporarily suspended and then revitalized by making recourse to quasi-external global forces that were, so to speak, domestically produced.

The three examples from South Africa (Spreen, 2004), Mongolia (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006), and Argentina (Esper, 2024) are meant to show the existence of additional variations in the temporal dimension if the seven temporalities are studied in combination. In the case of South Africa's adoption of the global outcomes-based curriculum, policymakers turned the clock back by retroactively changing the narrative of how OBE "came" to South Africa. Policymakers in Mongolia, in turn, had to advance the clock forward and work toward a global vision of a future in which, since Education for All (1990), all efforts were directed at improving the situation of girls and women and where sedentary models of schooling were seen as the normal case scenario. At the time, the promissory future had little to do with the reality of an inverse gender gap and the challenges of nomadic education. Nevertheless, they had to speak the language of donors to secure funds for their reforms. In the Argentinian case, policy-makers stopped the clock and, a few years later, revitalized the protracted policy debate on standardized testing by introducing an additional, more compelling argument along the lines of "UNESCO and the OECD said so." Expressed in the terminology of sociological systems theory (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021), both policymakers in South Africa and Argentina managed to secure buy-in for their decisions by generating "additional meaning" (German: *Zusatzsinn*). The act of externalization set in motion a depoliticization process and helped coalition-building across political divisions. The three examples of how policymakers turn the clock backward (South Africa), forward (Mongolia), or stop the clock (Argentina) are meant to illustrate how time is used in a non-linear, non-chronological manner for reasons of political and economic maneuver.

Arguably, time in education policy constitutes a "wicked problem" (see Djelic & Quack, 2005). Whether education or, more narrowly, the school curriculum adequately prepares students for life as grown-ups may only be assessed in the distant future. By then, curriculum developers will have, yet again, projected their new ideas into a distant future. Feedback is indefinitely deferred. If technology is what turns inputs into desired outcomes, then education has a serious "technology deficit" problem (Luhmann & Schorr, 1979). Feedback on educational outcomes is often delayed, leading to a significant deficit in the technology used for education. The OECD and the World Bank have both attempted to address this issue. The OECD has examined the skills needed in the twenty-first century (Schleicher, 2017), while the World Bank has projected the necessary learning-adjusted years of schooling for a productive economy using its

Human Development Index. However, only time will tell if their predictions, and those of the numerous other policy advisors, have been correct.

The wickedness of the temporal configuration in education sits deeper than what international organizations choose to make out of it. It touches the soul of education. As Popkewitz (2013) majestically remarked, we fabricate the educable child within a "historical grid" only to elevate ourselves as educators into a position of superiority. That position entitles us in the present to set the educable child onto what is believed at the time to be the right path (Popkewitz, 2013, p. 442). We have a significant apparatus in place to govern the child. The history of the present helps reduce insecurities and provides legitimacy for an educational agenda that aims to prepare students for unknown futures.

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# Index[1]