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Integration theories and European education policy: bringing the role of ideas back in

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Abstract

Education policy, traditionally a fortress of state-building processes, is now being challenged by the emergence of a new dimension at the European level. The Lisbon Strategy of 2000 has not only redefined education as a tool for improving Europe's competitiveness within the knowledge economy, but it has also significantly expanded the role of the European Commission as a legitimate actor intervening in education. Although the increasing involvement of the EU in education has been empirically covered by the existing literature, less attention has been devoted to elucidating these changes from a theoretical point of view. This article contends that these transformations raise a theoretical puzzle in terms of the understanding of the two mainstream theories of European integration. This argument is developed in three steps. First, the article examines the historical developments of EU competences in education. It then critically engages with the main theoretical explanations of European integration theories in relation to these changes, namely supranationalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, asserting that these approaches do not fully account for a comprehensive explanation of the drivers behind these transformations. By contrast, the article suggests that broadening the analytical lens to include a more ideas-centred approach provides a more in-depth understanding of European education policy.

Keywords

European education policy, European integration theories, ideas, European Commission

Education and training systems in Europe have been closely linked to nation-building processes (Bartolini 2005) and have always been perceived as a sensitive area of national diversity with the responsibility at the European level being mainly focused on mobility and the promotion of European identity (Verhoeven 2001; de Wit and Verhoeven 2001; Corbett 2005). However, since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the competences of the European Union (EU) in the policy field of education have increased, with the European Commission now being de facto involved in the formulation of a cognitive, normative and regulative model of European education policy (Martens, Nagel, Windzio and Weymann 2010; Jakobi, Martens and Wolf 2010).

The Lisbon summit in 2000 is considered to be a watershed in European education and training policy (Gornitzka 2006). Through the standard setting and monitoring instruments implemented with the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), the European Commission has extended its policy capacity and is now able to recommend to nation states that they should change their education policies (Nagel, Martens and Windzio 2010: 5; Jakobi, Martens and Wolf 2010). Moreover, the Bologna (1999) and Copenhagen (2002) processes for higher education and vocational education and training not only linked education to EU economic policies (Walkenhorst 2008) but also triggered a high degree of transnationality and interactions between experts, networks and civil servants. Education is now one of the main pillars of the 'Europe 2020 Strategy' launched in 2009 and, within the governance architecture of the European Semester, the European Commission provides country recommendations to Member States on their education and training systems with education fully embedded in European economic policies. In a nutshell, we can observe a complete redesigning of European education policy in terms of what to do, how to do it and who is in charge.

This article examines these transformations from a theoretical point of view and argues that they raise some puzzling questions for the 'two families of integration theory' literature (Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006): supranationalism and liberal intergovernmentalism (LI). In particular, why did the European Commission increase its role in education policy only after the 2000s and not before? And why have Member States, which still have exclusive competence in education matters, agreed to delegate some aspects of this domain to the EU level? Although a growing body of literature has provided excellent insights into the increasing involvement of the European Commission in education (Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg 2011; Walkenhorst 2008; Ertl 2003), this article contends that these transformations cannot be fully explained by supranationalist or LI approaches.

On the one hand, supranationalist approaches, which explain integration as a path-dependent conduit led by technocratic imperatives and spillover effects (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1998), cannot explain why the developments in the European education agenda have taken place without any formal change in the treaty, with the EU still having limited competence in supporting and supplementing Member States' actions.

Indeed, although the idea of European cooperation in education has a long history dating back to the 1960s (see Corbett 2005), it has always been a history of failure in practice, with the European Commission facing considerable resistance from Member States in terms of cooperating in this policy field. Therefore, how the European Commission only managed after the 2000s to overcome the long-standing historical reluctance of Member States to cede any power in this sensitive policy area without any legal change in the treaty is an issue that requires further clarification. On the

other hand, these changes did not arise from Member States' decision to delegate sovereignty to the EU according to their domestically determined preferences, as an LI explanation would posit (Moravcsik 1998; 1993). Education has always been perceived as a strong domestic competence, closely linked to nation-building processes, and as an area of national diversity (de Wit and Verhoeven 2001; Bartolini 2005). It is also a salient issue for policymakers and public opinion. As Beukel (2001: 126) observes, 'the very notion of "Europeanization of education" causes concern in most countries in Europe, one reason being that it is equated with homogenization of the educational system that could imply a loss of national identity'. Accordingly, education is a prominent issue in the eyes of the electorate (see Nóvoa and deJong-Lambert 2003). In all these respects, given that education is not only closely linked to national identity and long-standing traditions of different cultural and social purposes but is also attractive in terms of electoral votes, we should not expect Member States to agree on a coordinated approach based on common pro-market goals to be achieved through benchmarking and indicators.

Put differently, although both supranationalist and LI approaches can be helpful in analysing policy areas where the transfer of competences is more straightforward (such as competition, trade and monetary policy), they are less equipped to elucidate shifts of competences in those sectors, such as education, characterised by shared competences, strong national roots and institutional complexity (Zahariadis 2008). As a caveat, this paper does not deny that European education policy remains intergovernmentally constructed with Member States being the main actors in this policy field. Nor does it deny the fact that the concept of the 'Europeanization' of education also incorporates supranational dynamics. Nevertheless, it does argue that relying exclusively on a supranational or LI approach is not sufficient to fully capture the policy transformations that have occurred post-Lisbon. Rather, drawing from a constructivist epistemology where the basic claim is that interests and preferences are social constructions that are not objectively given (Hay 2002), this article attempts to overcome the dichotomy between these two theoretical strands and to complement it by suggesting that ideas should be brought back in (Béland and Cox 2010) to the analysis of the transformations of European education policy. In doing so, it suggests that an ideational perspective – namely a perspective where specific cognitions guide actors' responses to policy choices (Jacobs 2015: 43) – might be better analytically equipped to account for these transformations.

This article is structured as follows. By drawing from secondary literature and official EU documentation, such as Commission communications, Commission reports and White Papers, the following section briefly illustrates the main developments in EU competences in education, providing evidence of a shift in terms of the institutional responsibilities of the European Commission in this domain. The article then discusses the two main theoretical approaches of European integration studies (supranationalism and LI) and considers the extent to which they can explain these changes. Section four highlights the importance of adopting a more ideas-centred approach to better understand education within the European integration process. The final section summarises the argument and offers some concluding remarks.

THE EVOLUTION OF EU COMPETENCES IN EDUCATION

During the 1970s, the term 'grey area' (*zone grise*) referred to those policy areas that were not originally mentioned in the Rome Treaty and that were characterised by 'non-economic aims' (Commission of the European Communities 1978). Education policy was one such grey area. Indeed, whereas Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome (1957) mentioned vocational training with reference to the drawing up of general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy, there was no reference to education, though within the wider treaties of Rome, Article 9 of Euratom had proposed the formation of a European University. The main purpose of the Community was geared towards promoting economic cooperation and trade through the implementation of a customs union and a common agricultural policy, with education deeply rooted within the competences of Member States under a strong intergovernmental approach (Lawn and Nóvoa 2002).

From the 1980s onwards, EU education policy entered a new stage, identified as the 'supranationalist turn', with education being viewed as a crucial instrument in the political and economic relaunch of Europe (Walkenhorst 2008; Trondal 2002: 9). In addition, because of the broader programme promoted by Jacques Delors which aimed to include social policy as one of the main items on the European agenda, there seemed to be a desire among Member States to add a cultural dimension to the European integration process, in which education was to play an important role (Beukel 1994). The 1980s also marked the beginning of new initiatives and cooperation programmes. Among the factors that encouraged the European Commission to establish its new programmes in the field of education and training. The most significant was the 1985 *Gravier* judgment with the European Court of Justice ruling that higher education could be covered within the European Economic Community Treaty in the general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy (Article 128) (European Court of Justice 1985) and thus holding that vocational training included 'any form of education which prepares for a qualification for a particular profession' (European Commission 2006: 102). As a result of this ruling – which does not sit in isolation but it was nevertheless preceded by the 1983 *Forcheri* case on fees for vocational education courses and followed by the 1988 *Blaizot* case regarding Community citizens seeking access to education systems of other foreign states (see also Gori 2001) – the European Commission implemented a new wave of projects and exchange mobility programmes. This included COMETT, for education and training for technology, ERASMUS, for the mobility of university students, and Lingua, for foreign language learning (Keeling 2006; Ertl 2003). As also argued by Ertl (2003: 9), the impact of the Community policies on national systems of education and training was limited 'because of the modest and fragmented nature of Community projects, and also because the unclear legal foundations allowed the Member States to interpret and implement Community policies selectively'.

1992 marked an important milestone in the evolution of European education policy. Indeed, it was only with the Treaty of Maastricht that education was mentioned at the European level, albeit under the 'subsidiarity' principle. Specifically, Article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty clearly stated the independence of national education policy by arguing that education and training systems and the content of learning programmes were the responsibility of Member States. In addition, the Article 126 emphasised the idea of 'quality' education by suggesting that 'the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member

States'. This cooperation had to be achieved through a wide range of actions; for instance, by promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks and exchanging information on Member States' education systems. However, it would be difficult to claim that Maastricht marked a new phase in EU education policy. The aims of the policy remained practically the same and, throughout the 1990s, the Commission continued its emphasis on the 'programme approach' with education still being strongly regarded as a domestic competence (Ertl 2003: 12).

In parallel with these institutional innovations, the 1990s were also characterised by the emergence of a discourse led by the European Commission that emphasised the contribution of education to Europe's competitiveness. The White Paper *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment*, which was presented by Jacques Delors in 1993 and referred to as 'the most significant EU policy document with regard to education and training', established lifelong learning as a guiding strategy in EU policies (Field 2006: 7). In a similar vein, the White Paper *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (Commission of the European Communities 1995) and the Communication *Towards a Europe of Knowledge* (Commission of the European Communities 1997) strongly emphasised the relationship between education and Europe's economic growth. Education was indeed framed as a source of 'competitive advantage' that could help the restructuring of European economies in the face of US and Japanese competition (Goujon 2001: 329). What these publications had in common was their approach to education from a perspective of a 'common European problem' to be tackled in order to remain competitive in the global economy.

The Lisbon Strategy represented a policy 'turning point' with education becoming 'a key component of the European knowledge-based economic model' (Nóvoa and deJong-Lambert 2003: 55; Ertl 2006; Corbett 2012). In order to meet the goal of becoming the 'most competitive knowledge-based economy', Lisbon called for an increase in investment in human resources, an improvement in attainment levels, the development of basic skills and competences in the labour force and an increase in European mobility, with knowledge and skills defined as a necessary component of the economic and social reform strategy (Gornitzka 2006). For the very first time in the history of European education policy, Member States agreed on common objectives, benchmarks and indicators to be achieved within the new policy mode of the OMC. The 2002 Barcelona European Council approved a common policy framework for European cooperation entitled *Education and Training 2010*, with the objective of 'making these education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010' (Council of the European Union 2004: 43). Within this programme, more concrete objectives were formulated together with a detailed follow-up and benchmarks and indicators for measuring progress (Council of the European Union 2004).

Fully embedded in the policy framework of *Education and Training 2010* are the Copenhagen Process and the Bologna Process which focus on cooperation in vocational education and training and on higher education respectively. Launched by the Copenhagen Declaration of November 2002, the Copenhagen Process defined a clear set of priorities for (voluntary) European cooperation in vocational education and training (Council of the European Union 2002). The Copenhagen Process also set in motion a number of concrete policy initiatives, including the creation of a single European framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences – Europass, the development of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) aimed at

linking qualifications systems at the national and sectoral level and the development of a European Credit Transfer system for vocational education and training (ECVET) to enable the transfer and recognition of learning outcomes across the EU (European Commission 2006).

The Bologna Process for higher education, although originally initiated as an intergovernmental initiative among Member States (in 1998, Ministers from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy signed the Sorbonne Declaration, aimed at creating a common reference framework within a foreseen European Higher Education Area [Walkenhorst 2008]), is also part of the overall EU strategy for cooperation in education and training and linked to the Lisbon Strategy by way of *Education and Training 2010* (Gornitzka 2006: 54). Embedded within the goals of the Lisbon Strategy and framed under 'the need to establish a more complete and far-reaching Europe' (Bologna Declaration 1999), Bologna was articulated around the following goals: (i) the adoption of academic credit systems that are comparable and recognisable; (ii) the adoption of a two-cycle system; (iii) the creation of a credit system; (iv) the promotion of mobility; (v) the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance; and (v) the promotion of a European dimension of higher education (Bologna Declaration 1999: 3-4).

The follow-up to the Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020, has confirmed the importance of education as part of the EU agenda and has given further legitimacy to the role of the European Commission. Within the framework of the European Semester – the cycle of economic and fiscal policy coordination within the EU – the European Commission provides Member States with country-specific recommendations in relation to the progress achieved vis-à-vis the priorities of the *Education and Training 2020* programme (European Commission 2013). Hence, despite there being no change in the legal competences of the European Commission since the Maastricht Treaty, it can be said that the European Commission has gone beyond its original competence of 'supporting and supplementing' Member States' educational policies in favour of a more active and visible coordination role under the OMC.

In accordance with the overall objective of this article, the next section aims to identify and critically assess the extent to which the two theories of European integration – supranationalism and liberal intergovernmentalism – help us understand the changes that occurred in European education policy with reference to the increasing legitimacy of the European Commission.

EXPLAINING THE CHANGES IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION POLICY

Supranationalism and LI are still the two main theoretical perspectives fruitfully employed to explain the process of European integration. Both deal with the extent to which Member States delegate competences to the EU level in a certain policy field. Supranational explanations draw from the neo-functional approaches that were prevalent in the early days of the European Community (Haas 1958) and revived in the 1990s (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1998). The main proposition is that supranational institutions are not mere passive agents of Member States but instead have their own interests, preferences, resources and power (Hix and Hoyland 2011). Neo-functionalism predicts incremental and path-dependent conduits to integration,

led by technocratic imperatives (Stroby-Jensen 2003: 88). A core element of supranational approaches is the concept of 'spillover', which accounts for a trend towards increasing integration, holding that integration in one field (e.g. the mobility of labour) inevitably leads to pressure for integration in others (e.g. common immigration and asylum policies; moves towards European citizenship). Therefore, according to this approach, we would expect there to be pressure from spillovers, and the EU institutions themselves to create a common EU education policy, regardless of the explicit domestic preferences in the field.

The second approach that has attempted to provide an explanation for the changes in EU education policy is LI (Moravcsik 1998; 1993). Here, Member States are the main actors. States form their preferences through their own internal political processes, bargain with each other to reach the optimal policy solution and, where it is in their interests to have a durable intergovernmental arrangement, delegate to supranational institutions the administration and enforcement of the mutually agreed solution. According to this interpretation, EU development is the result of an interplay between the interests and preferences of Member States, and supranational institutions are no more 'agents of the EU government than powerful independent actors' (Hix and Hoyland 2011: 16). Put simply, if Member States do not agree on a common EU education policy, they will not get one.

Several scholars have emphasised the supranational role of the European Commission as a key actor in European education policy (Trondal 2002; Pépin 2006; Keeling 2006; Hingel 2001; Field 1997; Ertl 2003; Dehmel 2006). Manuel Souto-Otero and colleagues, in addressing the mechanisms by which the Commission has advanced in the field of education since the Lisbon Strategy, noted how 'the Commission has – through previous preparation and framing work and then through the use of the Open Method of Coordination – been very successful in driving initiatives in areas where it previously faced strong opposition and blockages from Member States' (Souto-Otero, Fleckenstein and Dacombe 2008: 244). With reference to the process through which the European Commission has advanced its agenda, Keeling (2006: 208) focused on the Commission's higher education discourse within the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process, pointing out how the Commission has been an 'indispensable player' in promoting a discourse that emphasises growth and employability. Similarly, Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg (2011: 1008), by employing participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, examined how the soft policy mode of the OMC has enabled the European Commission to gain policy capacity without a formal delegation of Member States by influencing the content of national policy agendas for education on educational levels from primary school to higher education. In this way, they borrow the neo-functional concept of spillover by arguing that the OMC contributed to socialisation and increased cooperation. By analysing the increase in cross-border activities among universities, faculties and students in higher education, Beerkens (2008: 423) highlighted the ability of the European Commission to act as a policy entrepreneur and to set and channel the discourse in higher education. Finally, Ertl (2003) argued that the establishment of the exchange mobility programmes and the related funding is another factor that explains the influence of the European Commission.

Supranational institutions can strategically exploit the different domestic interests to advance their own agenda as policy entrepreneurs. In this regard, one example would be the highly intergovernmental Bologna Process, in which the European Commission,

which was originally excluded, later became a full member thanks to the spillover effect of already being a legitimate actor in research and innovation (Veiga, Magalhães and Amaral 2015: 85) and to the alignment of the Bologna Process's goals with the EU Lisbon agenda for education (Corbett 2012). Keeling (2006) and Corbett (2012) concurred on the policy entrepreneurship of the European Commission. While Keeling (2006) argued that the Commission has been a successful actor in shaping the education discourse Europe-wide, Corbett (2005) investigated the role of the European Commission as a policy entrepreneur in the evolution of higher education policy, and showed a political process shaped by unexpected events and led by the policy entrepreneurship of some Commission officials.

What these studies have in common is a view of the European Commission as a policy entrepreneur that is able to orchestrate socialisation, to shape policy agendas and to create a constituency of support through the development of a European network of experts and stakeholders (Pollack 1995; Laffan 1997). Taken together, this body of research is grounded in those theoretical arguments that view the European Commission as a supranational policy entrepreneur engaging in 'entrepreneurial activity' (Pollack 1995 : 138) as a 'purposeful opportunist', referring to the Commission's embodiment of the interests of the Community while representing the sum of the particular interests of Member States (Cram 1994: 6). As argued by Pollack (1995: 124), the Commission can strategically exploit the different domestic preferences to promote its own agenda. Indeed, its agenda-setting influence depends on 'Member State uncertainty regarding the problems and policies confronting them and on the Commission's acuity in identifying problems and policies that can rally the necessary consensus among Member States in search of solutions to their policy problems' (Pollack 1995: 128). This is what Pollack (1995) refers to as 'creeping competence', meaning that the Commission's initial competences creep into other policy areas without formal authorisation.

However, applying a supranational approach to the developments of European education policy is not totally convincing. First, given that education is such a visible policy area in Member States in which the Commission lacks any formal competence, supranational actors could be influential, and hence act as informal agenda-setters, only to the extent to which they can convince Member States and political elites to follow their favoured agenda for educational reforms (Pollack 1995). In other words, the European Commission needs to persuade Member States of the advantages of supranational cooperation in order to shift their loyalties away from their national institutions and towards European institutions. This suggests that a supranationalist approach should at least be supplemented by a more ideas-centred analysis that could elucidate why the issues the Commission was advocating had such broad resonance. Second, is the European Commission the only policy entrepreneur to set the education agenda and shape its content? Even though the literature has without exception focused on the policy entrepreneurship of the European Commission, it may be possible that other actors have influenced this process. This is a perspective that has to date been neglected by the literature. For instance, the role of non-state actors, including unions and the world of business and employers, in diffusing education reforms and policy goals has been largely unexplored (Jakobi, Martens and Wolf 2010; Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011). Although non-state actors do not have as much material power as state actors, they can hold powerful ideas, beliefs, scientific evidence and moral principles that give them strength and legitimacy. As Susan Strange (1996: 14) put it, 'politics is larger than what politicians do, and that power

can be exercised – as it is every day being exercised – by non-state authorities as well as governments’. This suggests that broadening the analytical lens to include more of the social world would provide a better account of the dynamics and mechanism of the European education policy process.

Furthermore, even though the concept of spillover and the policy entrepreneurship of the European Commission might be useful in terms of shedding light on some developments of EU policy, and while it is true that European education has experienced a qualitative and quantitative expansion since Lisbon, it would be difficult to assert that the undisputed need for cooperation has been translated into supranational integration, as predicted by supranationalism. In addition the Lisbon Strategy and the new policymaking formula of the OMC redirect educational policy formulation back to the national ministries and thus further limit the influence of the Commission. Therefore, the concept of ‘spillovers’ clearly shows its limitations as it cannot explain why more integration has not occurred in education at the European level. As pointed out by Moravcsik (1993: 476), ‘neo-functionalism appears to mispredict both the trajectory and the process of EC evolution’.

Other scholars have examined the changes in European education policy from theoretical perspectives more grounded in the LI lens of analysis, on the assumption that supranational institutions are mere agents of the EU system of government rather than powerful independent actors (Moravcsik 1998; Hix and Hoyland 2011: 16). In exploring the evolution, expansion and dynamics of European education policy, Walkenhorst (2008: 571) argued that, since the 2000s, education ‘has experienced a paradigm shift in its policy aims’. Through a quantitative content analysis of EU official documents from the 1970s to 2006, he highlighted how the aims of European education policy have progressed from being ‘primarily politico-educational goals to a supplementary market and workforce creation tool’ (Walkenhorst 2008: 569). In identifying the drivers of this shift, Walkenhorst (2008) pointed to two factors: first, the changes in the economic environment, growing demands for internationalisation and globalisation trends that have triggered more political activity; and second, national reform pressures that have led Member States to make strategic use of the OMC as a tool to implement domestic reforms. In other words, the overall European education agenda and the use of the OMC are helpful to some governments in achieving education reforms that might be resisted on a purely domestic basis, where instead they can strategically take advantage of the EU Commission with its operational infrastructure and resources of information, experience and research capacities (Nugent 2010).

This approach may be useful in illuminating some turning points in the evolution of the policy by which Member States have represented both a negative and positive impetus. For instance, although Maastricht gave the EU certain competences in education, the principle of subsidiarity meant that these competences were quite limited. On the other hand, certain positive initiatives have resulted from intergovernmental agreements, for example, the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration which gave rise to the Bologna Process for higher education. In this sense, Bologna would represent a good case in supporting the intergovernmentalist interpretation of governments using supranational institutions and programmes to pursue favoured national goals that might be politically difficult to promote on a purely domestic basis (Nagel 2010). For instance, the Sorbonne Declaration was used by the original participating governments to ‘kick-start domestic reform agendas’ in higher education (Knodel and Walkenhorst 2010: 138).

However, it is not enough to assume that Member States intended to increase cooperation in education and that the rise of the EU policy agenda was the consequence. This assumption implies a specific question: under what conditions would an intergovernmental framework be applicable? The answer should relate to the specific nature of education as a policy field, which is characterised by 'ambiguity' and 'high issue complexity' (Zahariadis 2008). While ambiguity refers to a process 'where there is a shifting roster of participants, opaque technologies and individuals with unclear preferences' (Ackrill, Kay and Zahariadis 2013: 871), high issue complexity indicates the degree of interaction (horizontal and vertical) among different policy actors that makes the direction of policy change more unpredictable (Zahariadis 2008). These examples are barely recognised by LI. As also pointed out by scholars, the LI approach based on the 'rational actor model' (Cini 2003: 103) 'wins easily' only in specific fields of EU politics, namely when it is applied to cases in which economic integration is the main concern and where decisions are taken on the basis of unanimous voting by Member States in the Council (Wincott 1995; Scharpf 1999). This suggests that, although the theory might be useful in explaining the more dramatic developments in the EU agenda, it does not seem to be a powerful explanation of many of the observed incremental developments; for instance, the elaboration of the different education programmes or the evolution of the common instruments to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe (e.g. some 'translation' devices such as the EQF).

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

Although an LI explanation aptly points out the economic constraints posed by globalisation, and although it can explain why Member States have pursued the education issue, it does face some blind spots. First, a rationalist explanation offers no theory of preferences. Instead, it deploys exogenous preferences to explain individual and social choice. As Cini (2003: 95) put it, this explanation has 'nothing to do with ideology or idealism, but is founded on the rational conduct of governments as they seek to deal with the policy issues that confront them in the modern world'. Second, as mentioned earlier, it does not account for the specific peculiarity of education as a policy field characterised by 'ambiguity' and 'high issue complexity' (Zahariadis 2008). Third, whereas an LI approach is undoubtedly important in explaining actors' strategic behaviour in their decisions to cooperate at the European level, its focus on a short-time horizon neglects potential long-term factors that might elucidate how the choice was made. In other words, where this approach aptly makes its contribution is at the stage at which the policy has been chosen, but it is less concerned with the stage at which the policy is formulated and debated. Therefore, LI does not clarify what has

persuaded Member States to see the problem of education in terms that made, for instance, coordination around benchmarking and indicators the preferred solution. Hence, to make this explanation more fruitful, it should be at least enriched with a more ideational lens of analysis that is able to capture the process through which specific ideas and beliefs shaped actors' interests.

To summarise, two reflections arise from this critical review of the two European integration theories. First, what has emerged from the literature is an overemphasis on the role of the European Commission in driving these changes. However, a solid explanation of the mechanism through which the European Commission gained (and maintained) its role is still lacking. At the same time, the role of non-state actors in contributing to the formulation and shaping of European education policy has been largely unexplored. Second, under an LI approach, existing perspectives are limited as they fail to elucidate how specific ideas were chosen and how the common consensus around specific problems was constructed given also the ambiguity and institutional complexity of the policy field of education. For these reasons, this article suggests that by complementing these perspectives with an ideational approach, it might be possible to better clarify how preferences were formed and why some preferences mattered more than others.

BEYOND THE SUPRANATIONAL-INTERGOVERNMENTAL DICHOTOMY: BRINGING IDEAS BACK IN

Scholars who have sought to explain policy change through the role of ideas have often been confronted by the scepticism of objectivist approaches, such as those of LI scholars who contend that institutions, power relations and interests are the prevalent causal factors that explain policy change. However, as argued by Dani Rodrik (2014: 190), taking into account the role of ideas in shaping interests 'could provide a more convincing account of both stasis and change in political-economic life'. Providing an overview of the theoretical and empirical literature on ideas in policymaking is beyond the scope of this article (see Béland and Cox 2010). Here, the focus is on the concept of ideas as policy frames (Surel 2000) and on ideas as a policy paradigm (Hall 1989) in order to provide some preliminary thoughts on how these conceptual lenses of analysis might enable a better understanding of the increased role of the EU in education policy.

According to ideational perspectives, actors within policymaking processes often work within a framework of ideas and roadmaps that act as explanatory variables to define their preferences 'by stipulating causal patterns or by providing compelling ethical or moral motivations for actions' (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 16), and by constraining the cognitive range of useful solutions available to policymakers (Campbell 2002). Thus, ideas can be considered as frames that 'define, in a given field, world views, mechanisms of identity formation, principles of actions, as well as methodological prescriptions and practices for actors subscribing to the same frame' (Surel 2000: 496). Put simply, a frame is a perspective that identifies problems, suggests explanations and proposes certain public policy actions that could solve these problems. In a similar vein, the concept of a policy paradigm refers to 'not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problem they are meant to be addressing' (Hall 1993: 279). Once one idea gains acceptance, it provides a space and a structure for political action,

influencing the way in which actors interpret policy problems, as well as impacting the objectives and instruments of policy that are deemed appropriate (Hall 1993: 279). Ideas thus constitute the interpretive framework within which government officials and politicians understand and communicate about their work.

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

Building on these premises, how can we make sense of the changes in EU education policy with an increasing involvement of the European level despite the lack of a specific treaty provision? Could the adoption of an ideational perspective better elucidate the nature and dynamics of these transformations? Following Hall's conceptualisation, this paper contends that there are some aspects of these developments that may suggest how the developments in education policy have led to a paradigm shift intended as the institutionalisation of new principles and beliefs, including the expansion of the role of the European Commission. Recalling the evolution of EU education policy outlined earlier, it can be supposed that specific ideas and frames have emerged. For instance, the idea of European competitiveness linked to education has been a clear leitmotiv of the EU's political agenda, especially since the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategies. In the discourse advocated by the European Commission, the 'modernisation' of education and training systems has become an appealing catchword to indicate that national systems in Member States are substantially outdated and in need of reform. By borrowing the framing perspective, it is therefore noticeable how a specific problem (i.e. outdated training systems in Europe and a lack of EU competitiveness) has been linked with a particular solution (i.e. modernising them according to the policy objectives formulated by the EU).

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

Core features of this paradigm are represented by the changes in the goals of policy, principles and policy instruments of education (for example, the OMC and the use of benchmarks and indicators to assess the performance of Member States in achieving the EU targets). As stressed by Xavier Pratt Monnè, the former Deputy Director of DG Education and Culture, during a conference in London, 'we cannot tell Member States what to do, but we can tell them how they are doing and what they should do to improve their education systems' (Prats Monné 2013). In addition to reshaping the goals around education policy, the paradigm has changed the constellation of actors in the European education arena. For instance, within the framework of the Lisbon agenda and the policy processes of Bologna and Copenhagen, several European networks of civil servants and experts working in the field of education have been set up with the goal of exchanging information and promoting cooperation at Member State level, for example, by holding content-related discussions on the EU agenda. As also argued by Lawn (2006: 272; 2002: 20), 'a range of particular governing devices, such as networking, seminars, reviews, expert groups' is now embedded in a 'new space for education'. Thus, this view of the paradigm as a cooperation device would confirm Hall's argument regarding its very cohesive function in policymaking, which mitigates or unifies the otherwise dispersed interests in a given policy sector and allows coalition-building and collaboration between different groups of actors, changing the perceptions that actors have of their interests (Hall 1989).

Yet, 'taking ideas seriously' (Rodrik 2014: 205) may open a Pandora's box. Indeed, ideas are ubiquitous, unstable and rarely consistent. Which ideas mattered in the EU's involvement in education and how did they become institutionalised? Through which mechanisms was education framed as a solution to Europe's lack of competitiveness and Member States' interests in EU cooperation shaped? In this respect, further research should be carried out to detect how specific ideas about education acted as 'entry points' to legitimise the EU's involvement in education. In a similar way, scholars have empirically emphasised the importance of Lisbon as a paradigm shift or a turning point in education policy (Walkenhorst 2008; Ertl 2003), but very little is known about how ideational factors intervened in the policy formulation process. Finally, several tools now employed in the EU education agenda and part and parcel of the OMC, such as evaluation mechanisms and the focus on benchmarks and performance indicators, draw inspiration from the ideas and approaches of New Public Management, developed worldwide and contributed to by international organisations, in particular the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Verger, Novelli and Altinyelken 2012). Thus, further studies could address in greater depth how non-state actors and international organisations acted as 'ideas carriers' in advancing specific ideas about education. In sum, expanding the theoretical horizon of analysis with the inclusion of an ideational perspective could improve our understanding of education policy and its significance within the European integration process.

CONCLUSION

The motivation for this paper was to explain the puzzle concerning the transformations in European education policy and investigate the shift in the institutional responsibilities of the European Commission since the Lisbon Strategy of 2000. The evolution of EU competences in education has highlighted the transformations in European education policy from a 'grey area' in the 1970s to a 'European educational space' accompanied by a shift in the institutional responsibility of the European

Commission that, through the benchmarking and monitoring tools of the OMC, now performs a more incisive role in Member States' education systems. However, given that education is strictly an area of Member States' competence and a sensitive policy field linked to nation-building and states' identity, what explains the transformations which occurred after the Lisbon Strategy of 2000?

The strategy employed by this article to address this question has been theoretical in nature, with the main argument being that conventional approaches to EU integration fail to fully explain these transformations. Indeed, even though supranationalism and LI can be relevant in explaining some of the stages of the development of EU policies, both have pitfalls. To begin with, a supranationalist approach cannot explain why more integration did not occur or, in other words, why we have not seen the emergence of a genuine common European education policy. Concurrently, this theory does not fully capture how the consensus around a specific educational problem was constructed, considering the limited competences of the European Commission in this policy field. In the case of LI, where interests and domestic preferences represent the *deus ex machina* of policy change, it is not entirely clear how Member States decided to transfer some competences to the supranational level in such a nationally sensitive policy field.

Moreover, while an LI explanation aptly explains the stage at which a specific policy solution for education was chosen, it has little to say about how Member States' interests were (re)defined. Taken together, both lines of explanation emphasise the form of a policy rather than its content. They pay less attention to how a particular policy orientation emerged and why a certain set of ideas was favoured over others. Moreover, both theories seem less suitable when applied to more institutionally complex and ambiguous policy areas, such as education. In other words, by relying exclusively on a supranational or LI approach, the existence of a European education policy risks being taken for granted in lieu of explaining how and under what conditions it was created.

Consequently, against the limitations of these explanations, this paper has suggested that the adoption of an ideational framework of analysis could better elucidate the input side of the policy formation of the European framework for education and further explain the factors behind the increased legitimacy of the European Commission to intervene in education. Drawing upon analytical tools from the ideational literature, namely the concept of frames and a policy paradigm, it could therefore be possible to capture the means by which ideational factors have impacted the policymaking process. To conclude, by considering ideas as explanatory variables, European education policy may emerge as being not only the result of Member States' agreements or the European Commission's policy entrepreneurship but also as the result of the diffusion of ideas – in this case – about the economic role of education in Europe.

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