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Transnational Education Transfer Overtime: Theory and Practice, Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT Education transfer, which has become almost a norm in education policy making and development, is a fundamental theme in comparative and international education. With increasing awareness of the global nature of human problems induced by globalization and manifested through, for example, global crises including the learning crisis and the Corona-virus pandemic, the education space has witnessed a tremendous increase in education transfer as well as the entry of different actors into the education space. This review article has three objectives. First, it discusses the processes of education transfer over time. Second, it focuses on the concept of reference society and the politics of education transfer in comparative education, examines Finland as a reference society and the transformation of that status into a business opportunity for the commercialisation of Finnish education worldwide. Third, the article discusses education transfer in times of crisis with a focus on Finnish education export. The paper draws attention to the implications of transnational education transfer, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges involved in the transfer of education from one context to another.

Keywords: Transnational education, education transfer, education borrowing, reference society, Finnish education, education in crisis, comparative education

Introduction

Policy transfer is commonly referred to as ‘a process by which knowledge of [education] policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 5). Transnational transfer is a broad phenomenon that involves the lending and borrowing of policies, ideas and practices from elsewhere. While lending refers to the context from which an idea originates, borrowing refers to the context in which it is received (Waldow, 2012). Policy borrowing can be explicit (direct references to international agendas) or silent (unrecognised policy-transfer processes) (Waldow, 2009).

Transnational education transfer which has become the norm in education policy making (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014) and development is a fundamental theme in comparative and international education. With increasing awareness of the global nature of human problems induced by globalization and manifested through, for example, the global learning crisis and the Coronavirus pandemic, the education space has witnessed a tremendous increase in education transfer as well as the entry of different actors into the education scene. Hence, there is an ongoing debate as to whether education systems are becoming more similar with the increase in the transfer of policies and practices from one locale to another (Dale, 1999; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008)

This review article has three objectives. First, the article examines the processes of transnational education transfer over time (from premodern to contemporary times). Second, the article focuses on the concept of reference society and the politics of education transfer in comparative education. Focus is also on the raise of Finland as a reference society and its transformation into a business opportunity for the commercialisation of Finnish education to the world. Third, the article discusses education transfer in times of crisis, drawing examples from the Finnish case. The article ends with a conclusion which highlights the challenges involved in the transfer of education from one context to another.

Processes of transnational education transfer overtime

Education transfer studies are comparative in nature and a fundamental theme in comparative education (Beech, 2006; Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012; Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003). Educational transfer studies have contributed to legitimising and establishing the field of comparative education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014) in the last few decades, both as a method of inquiry and as a frame for analysis. Although educational transfer as a phenomenon is not new, studies in comparative education have undergone significant changes in their methods of inquiry and analysis.

Education transfer is a complex process that requires careful consideration of the factors that would enable or hinder successful transfer from one context to another. Overtime, comparativists have highlighted the use and function of comparative studies in education and what the education transfer process should entail, that is, the different stages of the transfer process. It is worth highlighting that although the study of education transfer started in the 1880s, the practice can be traced back to 700 B.C.- 500 A.D.), the pre-scientific period that was characterized by documents produced by travelers' tales. For example, in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, many historians who had travelled to different places, produced histographies and reports about the circumstances in those areas, including accounts of how education was organized in the places they visited. These traveler's tales increased during the medieval times because of traveling for crusades, missionary work and trading also increased. Worth noting, also, is how the Jesuit priests disseminated European education across the Portuguese and Spanish colonies worldwide.

Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal (2003) traced a chronological development in the field of comparative education, starting from the 1880s. The authors noted that the 1880s was a period of 'knowing the other' when 'the transfer and circulation of ideas, in relation to the worldwide diffusion of mass schooling, created a curiosity to know other countries and educational processes', which will assist 'national reformers in their efforts to build national systems of education' (p. 424). In the 1920s, according to these authors, the focus was on 'understanding the other' after World War I because of the need for international cooperation. In the 1960s, the post-colonial period, the focus was on 'constructing the other' in terms of building educational systems in these new countries. This was done by exporting educational solutions to different countries and regions based on works that were carried out by international agencies, supported by the development of a 'scientific approach' for comparative studies. Finally, these authors identified the 2000s as a period of 'measuring the other' because of the 'need to create international tools and comparative indicators to measure the "efficiency" and the "quality" of education'. These studies mostly are carried out by international organisations whose recommendations shape policy debates and influence national policy-making.

Marc-Antoine Jullien's work in 1817, titled 'Esquisse d'un ouvrage sur l'éducation comparé' (Plan for a Work on Comparative Education) witnessed the birth of comparative education studies (Beech, 2006; Bray, 2007; Phillips, 1989). The work highlighted the need to collect systematic data and for a comparative method of inquiry in identifying best practices with the intent of transferring them to other systems (Bray, 2007; Phillips, 1989). Jullien's work marked the first phase in comparative education studies and was termed the period of 'borrowing' (Bray, 2007) because the main motivation to study other systems was the 'desire to "borrow" ideas that might be successfully imported into the home system...and from Jullien onwards, "borrowing" became a common, if often unrealistic, aim of much investigative work of a comparative nature' (Phillips, 2005, p. 23). Jullien's aim was to establish a set of principles that could be applied to improve education in most contexts (Beech, 2006). Despite his contributions to the field, Jullien has been criticised because of his view that education can be analysed independently and separately from its socio-historical context (Beech, 2006).

The second phase of studies in comparative education was represented by the work of Sir Michael Sadler in 1900 (Bray, 2007), who stressed that educational systems are linked to their society---and warned against selective borrowing (Bray, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). The title of his conference talk in 1900, 'How Far Can We Learn Anything of Practical Value From the Study of Foreign Systems of Education', emphasised that context is important (cited in Beech, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). As cited in Beech (2006, p. 5), unlike Jullien, Sadler noted that in studying other systems of education, 'we must not keep our eyes on the brick-and-mortar institutions, nor on the teachers and pupils only'; rather, the focus should be on the 'intangible, impalpable, spiritual force' upholding the system. This implies that:

> *In studying foreign systems of education, we should not forget that the things outside the school matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and of battles long ago. It has in it some of the secret working of national life (Sadler, cited in Beech 2006, p. 6).*

For Sadler, the benefits of studying other systems of education are about better understanding one's own system, and not necessarily to borrow, because to him, the idea of a universal educational model does not exist (Beech, 2006). Among the early comparativists, Victor Cousin is considered one of the most fervent supporters of educational borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). For example, in Cousin's reports on the 'State of Public Instruction in Prussia', he ended with a request for a transfer to take place (Beech (2006, p. 3). Unlike Jullien, who wanted to create a science of education that could be transferred to most contexts, Cousin was interested in using knowledge from elsewhere to improve and develop specifically the French system. Cousin's work has been acknowledged for 'advancing scientific credibility' in the field of comparative education through his survey of educational systems as a 'preliminary step, at a later stage, to justify educational borrowing from one system to another' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 58).

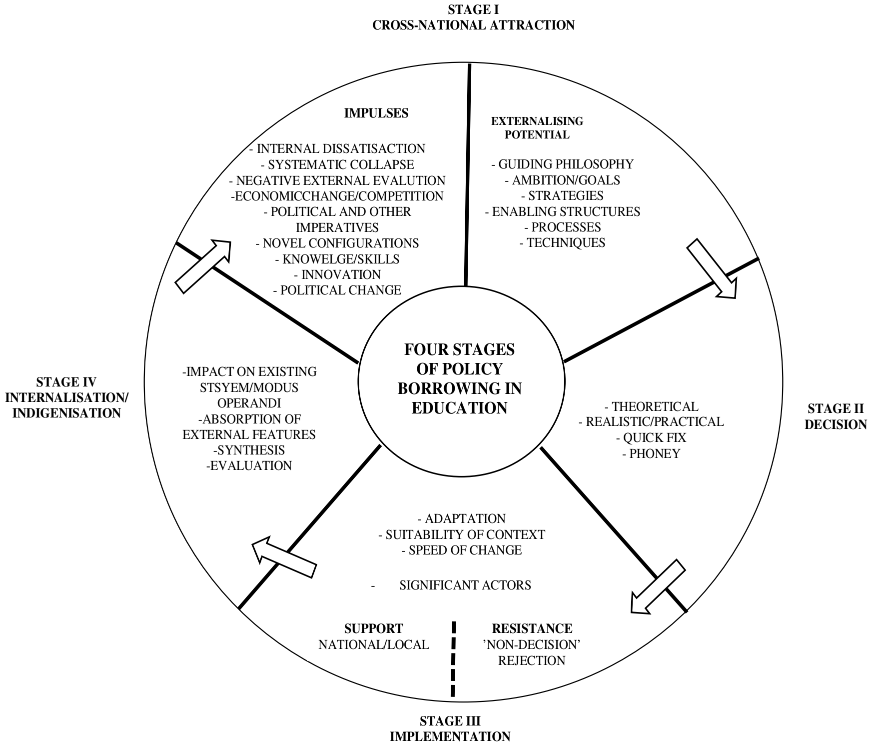
Despite the different views of early comparativists about the use of education models from elsewhere, there seems to be a consensus among comparative education scholar that the process of education transfer should start from a home-based problem. In this light, comparativist agree with Cousin's three-step chronological process of education transfer, starting with studying the 'local problem and needs of an educational system', searching for 'educational systems that had resolved similar problems and faced similar needs' and finally recommending 'borrowing of solutions from these educational systems' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002, p. 58). In other words, the transfer process should be such that 1) the local problem is identified 2), solutions sought from foreign systems of education and 3), tested solutions in foreign system are adapted and implemented in the new context (Beech, 2006). This process highlights the fact that policy transfer is a rational process whereby education policy makers first consider the problem, seek alternative solutions and select the best alternative (Rui, 2007). It also highlights the importance of adaptation in the education transfer process. In other words, solutions from elsewhere are not taken wholesale, but are locally adapted to suit the local context needs.

Research on policy transfer has evolved over time, leading to an expansion of what constitutes transfer and how it occurs. According to Steiner-Khamsi (2012), the concepts have been adjusted, refined and expanded to incorporate new trends in the field. For example, she observes that there has been a shift from concrete lessons learned from an educational system to a general discourse on international standards by policy makers in justifying reasons for cross-national attraction in education. This shift points to the fact that education transfer cannot be defined solely in terms of 'learning and understanding what is happening elsewhere in education' (Phillips, 2000, p. 299), with the intention of solving similar problems or improving and developing provisions in other systems (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). The focus on lessons learned from an educational system suggests a bilateral frame that currently is being replaced by an international frame (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). The shift to an international frame, which is often justified as compliance to international standards has implications for the education transfer process. It implies that the education transfer process begins from an already-existing solution before an examination of the local problem that fits that solution (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). This highlights the idea that policy making, in general and education transfer in particular, is not a rational and linear process (Ball, 1998) in which policy makers consider the problem and alternative solutions and then select the best alternative (Rui, 2007) to solve the home-based problem. Instead, it shows that policy transfer may begin with the adoption of a foreign idea before there is any examination of how that idea works in practice in different contexts.

The Education transfer framework

Policy transfer involves a complex process of adoption and adaptation (Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014) or reception and translation as referred to by Steiner-Khamsi (2016). Adoption/reception addresses the initial local contact with a foreign education model while adaptation/translation examines the local translation or recontextualization of the foreign education model. These key stages have been further broken down into distinct stages, as presented by Phillips and Ochs (2003, 2004). Based on an analysis of the German influence on the English system, these authors describe a circular and sequential model as a process consisting of four stages, i.e., the cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and internalisation/indigenisation stages of educational borrowing, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Four stages in educational policy borrowing:



Source: Phillips & Ochs (2003): Policy Borrowing in Education: Composite Processes

Stage I, the cross-national attraction stage, consists of two phases: 'impulses' and 'externalising potential'. Impulses refer to the (internal) factors and conditions at home that spark the search for ideas, best practices, policies and models abroad (externalising potential) that can be borrowed to solve similar and existing home problems. The externalising potentials are the 'borrowable' elements from an educational system, including guiding philosophy, ambitions/goals, strategies, enabling structures, processes and techniques.

Stage II, the decision stage, indicates when educational systems decide to change and refers to the ways in which governments introduce these new ideas, policies and models into the local context to start the process of change. The authors describe four different ways through which the decision can be introduced into the local context: theoretical (decision based on an abstract idea), realistic/practical (ideas that have proven successful elsewhere), quick fix (quick decisions made to solve urgent problems without sufficient regard for essential infrastructure and contextual factors) and phony (introducing ideas that appeal to the electorate, but with no intention of implementation).

Stage III, the implementation stage, considers the 'contextual conditions of the borrower country' to enable implementation (p. 780). With implementation, the focus is on the adaptation of what is borrowed and the suitability of the context that will determine the speed of change. The attitudes of significant actors (people/institutions) who can either support or resist are determined by the speed of change. Resistance takes the form of either indecision or complete rejection of the borrowed policy.

Stage IV, internalisation/indigenisation, involves a four-step process, including assessing the impact on the existing system, in which motives and objectives are examined in relation to the existing system; absorption of external features to understand the extent to which borrowed features have been adopted; synthesis, when borrowed policy/practice becomes part of the borrower country's strategy; and evaluation, a review to determine whether borrowing has been successful, which can lead to the start of the borrowing process again.

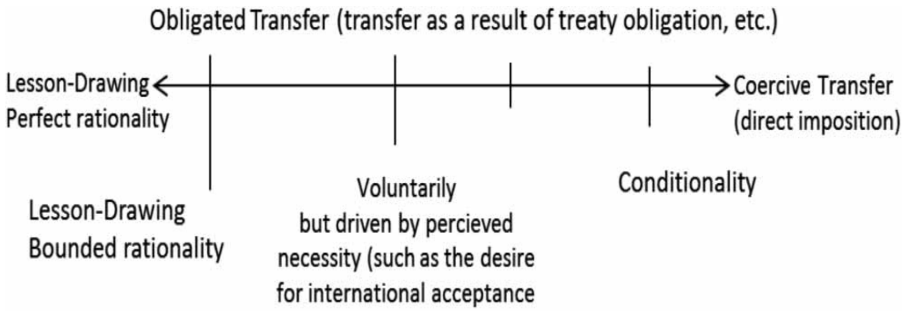
The cyclical process of policy borrowing in this model indicates that policy borrowing is not a one-time but a continuous process---from the cross-national attraction stage to the internalisation stage---which can lead to another borrowing process. Besides the four stages of policy borrowing, Ochs and Phillips (2004) describe four filters involved in the policy-borrowing process: interpretation, transmission, reception and implementation. Interpretation highlights that educational actors' experiences influence the way they understand and interpret educational occurrences and practices. After interpreting them, educational actors 'filter the policy through the lens of their own agenda' (p. 17), a process known as transmission. Reception, as the authors explained, is the stage at which the policy has passed from those who initially interpreted it (at the interpretation stage) and filtered it at the transmission stage. At the reception stage, the already filtered policy is filtered again by individuals and institutions with regard to their own purposes. At the implementation stage, the authors note that the policy still can be filtered, further distorting the original version. The four filters of borrowing indicate that the policy that is implemented in the receiving country can be very different from what was borrowed from the source.

Although Phillips and Ochs' four-stage model of policy borrowing described above provides an analytical tool for the study of policy borrowing, the model has, nonetheless, been criticised, grounded in the argument that 'it is unclear when one stage begins and another one ends, or that there might be a "reverse" direction, where a later phase of the borrowing process could be a catalyst for cross-national attraction' (Ochs, 2006, p. 612). A key issue with most comparative studies, as Steiner-Khamsi (2006) observed, is that they are biased toward developed countries, with limited relevance to developing countries. This criticism highlights the fact that the reasons for policy borrowing and the processes involved in developing countries might be different from the ones described in Phillips and Ochs' model. On one hand, it could be argued that if the reasons for borrowing begin with a local need, the possibility for policy borrowing to follow this model is stronger. On the other hand, if the motivation to borrow is sparked by political or economic factors (externally induced), there is a possibility that borrowing might not follow this sequence. Another criticism is that its sequential structure gives the false impression that the policy process is linear and rational, whereas in practice, the policy process can be random, with decisions based on the viewpoints and incentives of the multiple actors involved (Chow, 2014). Phillips and Ochs (2004, p. 781) also acknowledge that the model can be misleading and 'impede the investigation of complex issues by trapping an analysis within what appears to be a limited framework of analysis'.

Education transfer Continuum

Because of the complexities involved in the education transfer process, comparativists (in the field of political and educational sciences) have conceptualized the transfer process along a continuum. In the field of political science, Dolowitz & Marsh (1996, 1998, 2000) view policy transfer as a 'continuum ranging from lesson-drawing to the direct imposition of a programme by one political system on another as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Policy transfer continuum

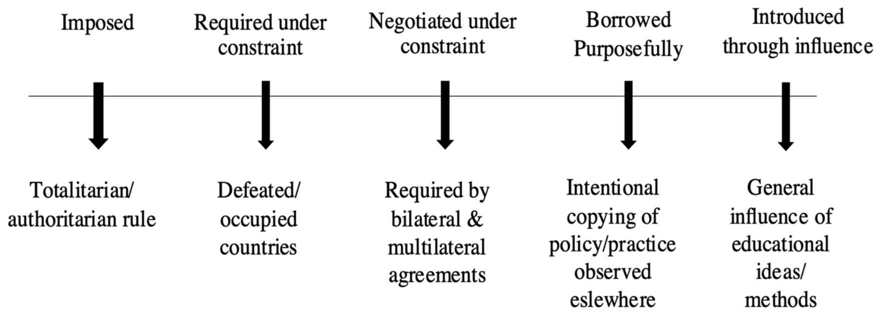


Source: Dolowitz and Marsh (2000).

In this continuum, the authors note that lesson-drawing signals the idea that actors engage in policy transfer as a 'rational response to a perceived process'. For example, 'dissatisfaction with the status quo' may require that actors engage in voluntary transfer in which programmes elsewhere are examined; the aim is to see the possibility of transferring these programmes to the local system (perfect rationality). However, it is assumed that most actors are not perfectly rational; they act with limited information. Thus, transfer may be based on an inaccurate assessment and mistaken information about the nature of the policy or about how it operates. With coercive transfer, the authors posit that national governments are compelled to transfer and adopt certain programmes and policies by virtue of being a member of an international organisation and as part of their obligation to the organisation. However, it is worthy to note that transfer may not always strictly be viewed as voluntary or coercive; transfer can be a mixture of both 'voluntary decisions and coercive pressures' (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). For example, as members of an international organisation, nations are required to comply with the organisation's policies and directives, which can be termed coercive transfer. On the other hand, however, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) further argue that because nation states voluntarily join the organisation and together shape its 'dictums', transfer in this sense can be considered both 'obligated' and 'negotiated' (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

Like Dolowitz and Marsh's conceptualization of the policy transfer continuum, in educational sciences, Phillips and Ochs (2004b) have put forth a 'continuum for educational transfer' as shown on Figure 2. Phillips & Och continuum also show a range of positions from imposed transfer at one end (far left) of the spectrum to transfer introduced by influence (far right) on the other end. However, unlike Dolowitz and Marsh, their continuum acknowledges the role of colonization in the education transfer process as seen in their description of imposed transfer on the left of the continuum

Figure 2: A continuum of educational transfer



Source: Phillips & Ochs 2004b.

Imposed transfer pertains to policies and practices that are/were forcefully imposed on other countries by totalitarian rule or authoritative regimes such as those imposed on the colonized countries in Africa. Transfer required under constraint is applicable to defeated or occupied countries that must adopt certain policies due to the current political situation. In the middle of the continuum is transfer 'negotiated under constraint' which aligns with Dolowitz & Marsh (2000) 'obligated transfer' and refers to policies required by bilateral or multilateral agreements. Examples of such agreements include the Bologna Process in Europe which is a European intergovernmental initiative to harmonize European systems of education through different lines of action such as the adoption of a credit system to measure students' workload, three cycles of studies (Bachelor's, Master's and PhD), a comparable diploma supplement, quality assurance mechanisms, the promotion of lifelong learning, student-centred learning, student and staff mobility, etc. (Bologna declaration, 1999, Eta 2018, Eta & Mngo 2021).

The last two positions in the continuum are voluntary transfers which include policies that 'are borrowed purposefully' and those that are 'introduced through influence'. Policies that are borrowed purposefully refer to those that involve the deliberate and intentional copying of policy from elsewhere. With the assumption that policy makers are rational actors, purposefully borrowed policies would follow Cousin's three-step chronological process of education transfer already discussed above which also aligns with Dolowitz & Marsh lesson drawing in their continuum. Finally, policies 'introduced through influence' occurs when professionals (for example, teachers) train in other countries and upon their return, introduce and adapt those foreign ideas, practices, techniques in their local contexts.

Reference society and the politics of education transfer in comparative education

This sub-section focuses on the very important topic of reference society in comparative education and how Finland became a reference society for other countries in search of best education practices and solutions. The section also discusses how Finland's position as a reference society became a market opportunity for education companies in Finland pre and during Covid-19.

The term 'reference societies' was first introduced by the macro-sociologist, Richard Bendix and alludes to 'a model nation [or several nation states] from which to borrow elements'. (Waldow, 2017, 2). Bendix further expanded the definition of reference society to refer to 'whenever intellectual leaders and an educated public react [positively or negatively] to the values and institutions of another country with ideas and actions that pertain to their own country' (Waldow (2017, 2019). This can also include reactions to both sub- and supra-national regions (Waldow, 2017, 2019). The notion of reference societies reinforces the act of education transfer as a process that involves at least two entities, the lender and the borrower as discussed in the introduction.

The use of reference societies by local systems, institutions and actors serves many functions. They are used as a political discursive tool to sometimes present a 'desirable model or anti-model (Waldow, 2017), a validation instrument (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021) produce legitimacy (Waldow 2012) especially for those highly contested or controversial domestic reforms (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002; Halpin & Troyna, 1995; Ochs, 2006; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) such as reforms related to privatisation, standardisation of student assessment and outcome-based educational reforms (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). They are also used by local education policy makers and other education stakeholders for glorifying (highlighting the strengths) or scandalizing (highlighting the weaknesses) of their local education systems (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003, Waldow, 2019). Sometimes reference societies serve the function of making local systems to feel a sense of belonging and not be left behind on a supposed global model (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). This is typical with policies of international and regional organisations or those through bilateral and multilateral agreements such as the European Bologna Process, and the UN sustainable development goals. Reference societies can also be used because a particular model or policy is trendy, hence it feels fashionable to make such references (Halpin and Troyna, 1995). The use of reference society for this purpose, only serves the purpose of a reference (a discourse to justify policy decisions), in which no actual policy is borrowed; rather, the supposed foreign idea is used to influence and inspire local reforms and solutions (Forestier et al., 2016; Ochs, 2006). It is worth highlighting that, references to systems and models elsewhere are not usually used because they are good or because they depict best practices (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), rather, they have 'much more to do with legitimating other related policies' (Halpin & Troyna, 1995, p.304) and giving authority to domestic reforms (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002).

Different factors influence the choice of a reference society. Countries' longstanding relationships and historically developed local perceptions of the referenced society influence the choice of which countries become reference societies in education (Santos & Centeno, 2021). This choice can also be influenced by perceptions of hierarchy (less-developed countries reference more-developed countries, and more-developed countries reference similarly advanced countries) and language (i.e., countries that speak the same language can reference each other) (Bray, 2007). It has been observed that governments of developing countries often use specific educational systems in the Global North as a model for emulation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). Eta, Kallo and Rinne (2018) highlighted that historical (colonial) relationships and language were some key factors that determined the reference societies from which Cameroon learned from and borrowed elements from the Bologna Process in its effort to harmonize the Cameroon higher education system. Political linkages can also influence the choice (i.e., referencing countries within the same political association) (Bray, 2007) or culturally homogenous countries (i.e., the Scandinavian or East Asian education systems are used as reference (Waldow, 2017). In comparative education, the term was—according to Waldow (2019)—first introduced by Butts (1973), associate dean and professor of Teachers College, Columbia University. Butts observes that the governments of developing countries frequently used a specific educational system in the Global North as a model for emulation. That country's path to "modernization" served government officials in the Global South as a reference for educational reforms in their country

International large-scale assessments (ILSAs), particularly the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have contributed a great deal towards establishing and reinforcing reference societies (Waldow, 2017, 2019,) and intensifying education transfer. ILSAs are increasingly used as a tool of governance and policy making (Waldow, 2019). As noted by Phillips and Ochs (2003, 2004), local policy makers' attraction to model aspects of other educational systems often arises from negative external evaluation such as the PISA. The PISA raises 'public awareness' by uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of the participating country's education system (Carvalho, Costa, & Gonçalves 2017, 155), hence, increasing education transfer from high performing countries. Through the PISA, we observe how countries use the results for glorification or scandalization purposes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003), and for the legitimisation or de-legitimisation of reforms (Takayama, Waldow, & Sung 2013) depending on the political agenda (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). High-performing countries in the PISA, as such Finland, are increasingly being used as reference societies in education policy (Sahlberg 2011; Takayama et al 2013; Waldow, Takayama, & Sung 2014) as discussed in the next section.

Finland as a reference society and its development into a market opportunity

Finland became a reference society for many education stakeholders worldwide seeking to improve their systems and education outcomes following Finland's outstanding performance, since the 2000s in PISA. PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment which measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges (OECD, 2021). In 2000, 32 countries (of which 28 were OECD members) participated in the first PISA and the focus was on reading literacy although mathematical and financial literacy were also assessed as seen on Table 1. Reading literacy is defined as an individual's ability in 'understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society' (OECD, 1999). Table 1 shows Finland's score points and position in the three literacy items measured, occupying first position in reading literacy out of the 32 countries that participated in the PISA.

Table 1: Finland's 2000 PISA results

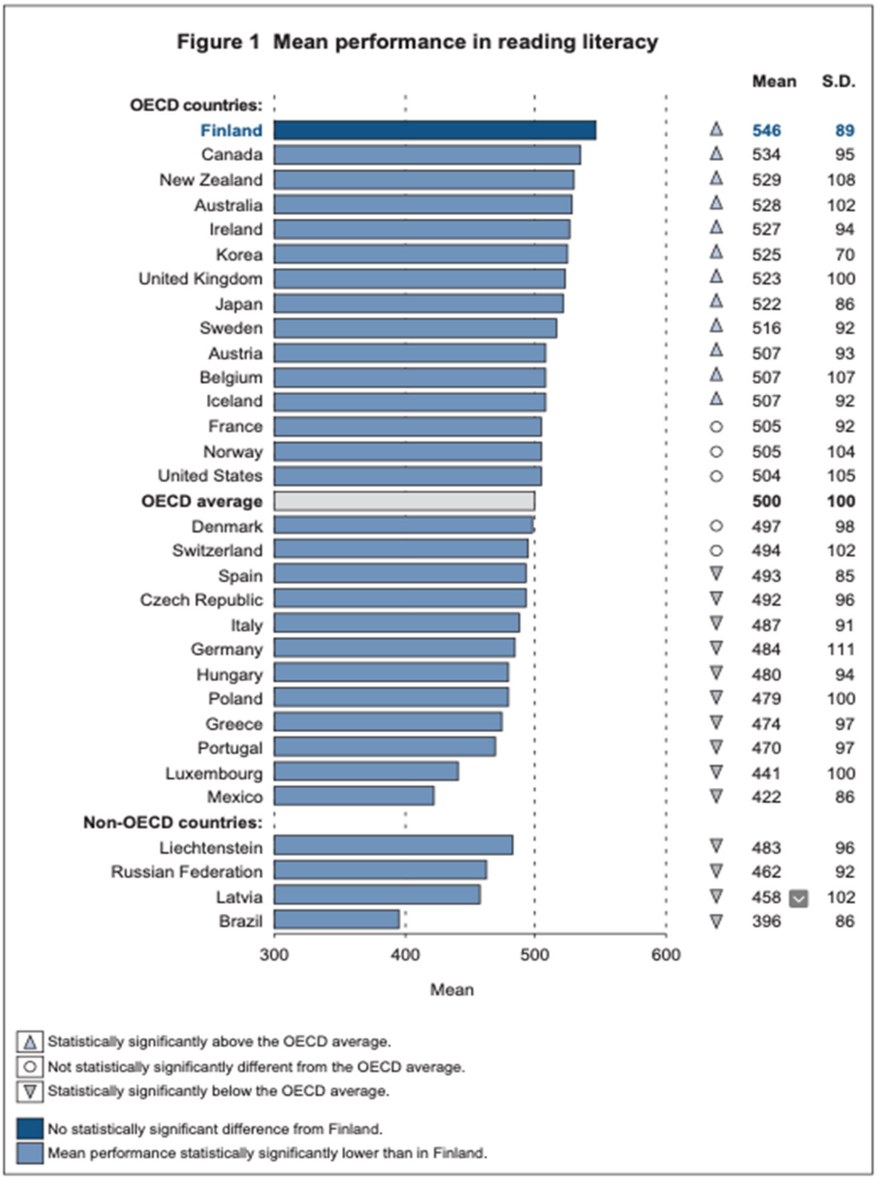
Finland's results	Score points	OCED countries	All participants
Reading literacy	546	1st	1st
Mathematical literacy	536	4th	4th
Science literacy	538	3rd	3rd

Source: Finland Ministry of Education and Culture (https://minedu.fi/en/pisa-2000-en)

Figure 3 below shows comparative data of participating countries performance in reading literacy in PISA 2000.

The mean scores of the countries participating in the PISA assessment of reading literacy in Figure 3 shows that Finland had the highest reading literacy performance in both the OECD and non-OECD countries.

Figure 3: PISA 2000 Participating countries performance in reading literacy.



Source: Välijärvi, et al 2002

In 2003, the focus of PISA was on mathematical literacy, defined as an individual's capacity in 'identifying, understanding and engaging in mathematics and making well-founded judgements about the role that mathematics plays as needed for an individual's current and future life as a constructive, concerned and reflective citizen' (OECD, 1999, p. 12). Mathematical literacy entails analysing, explaining and communicating ideas and posing, formulating and solving mathematical problems in diverse areas of life and in varied everyday situations. PISA stresses the application of mathematical knowledge in contexts that entail understanding, reflecting on and explaining matters. Finland's results of the 2003 PISA are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Finland's 2003 PISA results

Finland's results	Score points	OECD countries	All participants
Mathematical literacy	544	1st	2nd
Reading literacy	543	1st	1st
Science literacy	548	1st	1st
Problem solving	548	2nd	2nd

Source: Finland Ministry of Education and Culture (https://minedu.fi/en/pisa-2000-en)

Following Finland's performance in the PISA, there is a substantial body of research and reports highlighting Finland's potential to become an active player in the global education industry (GEI) (Cai & Kivistö, 2012; Reinikka, Ritva & Tulivuori, 2018) following in the footsteps of leading education export countries such as Australia, the UK, and the USA where education export is a multibillion-dollar business industry (Naidoo, 2010). As defined by Verger (2016), 'the GEI is an increasingly globalized economic sector in which a broad range of educational services and goods are produced, exchanged and consumed, often on a for-profit basis. The GEI is constituted by its own sets of processes, systems of rules, and social forces, which interact in the production, offer and demand of educational services and goods'. (Verger et al. (2016, p. 4)

Finland's remarkable performance has thus made it famous worldwide and opened up a global market opportunity (Education Finland, 2021; Simola, 2005) for countries eager to learn the 'miracle' (Simola, 2005) of Finnish education success. As a result, the Finnish government has identified education as a major export program with a clear objective to create opportunities and open doors for the export of Finnish education services and solutions at all levels of education worldwide (Education Finland, 2021).

This market opportunity also led to the creation of an institutionalized structure of Finnish education export - Education Finland - a Finnish governmental education export programme offering Finnish educational know-how and learning solutions globally which is managed by the Finnish National Agency for Education with a mandate to increase the global brand awareness of Finnish expertise and excellence in education, invoking interest in Finnish capabilities, expertise, and the Finnish education system globally. Based on this recognition and market opportunity, which is heavily supported by the government of Finland, many private Finnish education export companies have been created with Finnish education being productized and sold in different contexts (Räsänen, 2012; Vanhanen 2016). A review of the Education Finland website indicates that there are more than 120 Finnish education export companies offering a wide variety of products, services, and solutions at all levels of education worldwide from early childhood education and care to higher education, vocational education and training and professional development.

Although Finland's educational system gained international attention and recognition post the publication of the PISA 2000s results, Education Finland (2021) explains that Finland's outstanding results are a culmination of decades of reforms and systematic cooperation with other stakeholders:

> *It is good to know that the good results of Finnish education system were not achieved overnight. It has taken decades and many reforms to take the Finnish educational system where it is now. Finland has developed the education in a systematic way in a broad cooperation with stakeholders.*

An interesting question asked in recent studies is if other countries in the Nordic region (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) consider the Finnish education system as a reference or a counter-reference for their local educational reform? (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). As explained by Steiner-Khamsi (2021, p.8), it is possible that the '"Finnish success" is acknowledged but rendered irrelevant for one's own national context (the "yes, but ..." attitude explained earlier), or Finnish success is, for a variety of reasons, including linguistic ones, referenced via an authoritative source of information: OECD publications'. An important line of research would be how systems of education in Africa that reference Finnish education (and other education systems) use it and for what purpose.

Education transfer in times of crisis and Finnish education export

In previous sections, I have discussed processes of education transfer, highlighted the impulses for transnational attraction in education and how certain systems and organisations become reference societies in education for others seeking best practices. The above discussion on the processes involved in education transfer, have largely been based on education transfer during 'normal times'. To an extent, in normal times, policy makers can engage in what Rui (2007) refers to as rational policy making in line with Cousin's three steps process of education transfer in which policy makers first identify a local problem, seek alternative solutions elsewhere before settling on the best alternative that would best solve the local problems. In times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 global outbreak, the process of education transfer would most likely be different. A crisis signals not just threats and uncertainty but also urgency (Boin et al., 2018; Moynihan, 2008, 2009) which creates impossible conditions for policy making. Policy makers are, thus, forced to make urgent decisions with insufficient and incomplete information about causes and consequences (Bion et al., 2018) as well as lack of sufficient regard for essential infrastructure and contextual factors (Phillips & Ochs, 2003, 2004) that would make a foreign model successful in another context.

Due to the urgency in crisis situations, policy makers engage in transnational policy transfer for 'quick fix' solution as highlighted in Phillips & Ochs (2003, 2004) composite model of policy borrowing described above. This was the case during the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic and the consequent closures of schools and learning spaces which according to the United Nations (2020) created the largest disruption of education systems in more than 190 countries in all continents, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners. As learners could no longer attend traditional schools, the major challenge was how to keep learners learning during the lockdown? The diffusion and adoption of digital technologies for educational purposes became the norm and significantly increased worldwide as a result, however, with diverse experiences between countries and even socio-economic groups (Hurulle, 2021). For example, while some education systems (especially in the north) quickly switched to online learning because of competence in online teaching and learning, the necessary infrastructure and enabling environment to support online learning, others (especially systems of education in the south) struggled to provide continuity in education because of the lack thereof. The crisis also stimulated innovative approaches of teaching and learning, especially with the use of the radio and television (United Nations, 2021) in the south.

The need to solve urgent problems in education in times of crisis also means the opening of the education sector to different education providers (inducing the private sector) who take advantage of the crisis to market their education solutions and expertise (some for free) in response to the crisis. With Finland's strong reputation in basic education, there have been calls for Finland to step up its global role in education, especially in basic education in low and lower middle-income countries (Reinikka, Niemi & Tulivuori, 2018). During the COVID-19 school lockdown, a conglomerate of Finnish companies joined the Nordic initiative known as 'teach millions' in sharing its educational expertise with the world. The teach millions initiative 'was born out of the realisation that Nordic edtech could be harnessed to bring Nordic learning to the World. During the lockdown of 2020, edtech companies from the 8 Nordic-Baltic countries came together to offer their solutions to users for free (Teach millions, 2021). However, the goal of teach millions extends beyond contributing free education solutions during the Coronavirus pandemic to a solution bazaar, where clients can browse, try and buy Nordic Edtech (Teach millions, 2021) post COVID-19.

Besides the education solutions provided by the group of companies, individual Finnish companies also actively got involved in education export during the COVID-19, providing their solutions to other contexts. For example, GraphoGame, the personalised early grade phonics tool that helps children learn and train letters, letter-sounds and blending, by the Finnish company Grapho Group Ltd, become a go-to solution during the pandemic in the USA, and Latin American countries (including, Brazil Argentina, Columbia, Panama, Chile, Peru, Bolivoa, Guatemale and Venezula) as a free app to end-users (GraphoGame 2021a) to help fight the 'Coronavirus slide' in literacy (GraphoGame, 2021b). In Africa, the Finnish Learning Intelligence Group (LIG) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union for scaling up the introduction and adoption of LIG's portfolio companies, Claned Group and Grapho Group for the use of digital learning solutions in Africa during and post COVID-19 (GraphoGame, 2021c). It would be interesting to see research examining the impact of these solutions in the contexts in use and the processes involved in the transfer (including the production, and dissemination) and implementation of these Finnish solutions in the above local contexts. An interesting topic would be about the free distribution to end user- what does free entail and how does it really play out in practice.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the processes of education transfer pre and during COVID-19. That is, focused has been on transnational education transfer processes from premodern to contemporary times, how Finland became a reference society for other countries in search of best education practices and solutions and how the Finnish reference society status became a business opportunity for Finland to productise and sell Finnish education products and services to the global market. As noted by Phillips and Schweinfurt (2014) the task of comparativist is not only to unravel the processes involved in education transfer but also, to highlight the problems and warnings implicit in them. As a way of avoiding repetition, in this concluding section, I reflect specifically on challenges of policy transfer to emphasis some points already raised.

As can be seen from the presentation above, the process of policy transfer in normal times, can be different from education transfer in times of crisis because the threats, uncertainty and urgency components embedded in crisis which makes policy makers to settle for specific policies without adequate understanding of the situation they are dealing with and insufficient information about alternative solutions to the problems. Sadler (1990) famous speech mentioned above 'How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education' is very important here. Saddle's speech emphasizes one of the major challenges involved in transnational education transfer, the problem of context which relates to both our understanding of the lending and the borrowing contexts.

With regards to context, one of the challenges is, how well do education borrowers understand the things that make the policy successful in the lending context? This is a situation that Dolowitz & Marsh (2000) refer to as 'uninformed transfer', when the borrowing country has insufficient information about the policy and its operation in the country of origin. As highlighted in Sadler's speech, the things we see as successful in a foreign system are hugely conditioned by the things outside the school in the lending context which cannot be borrowed. Lack of understanding of this contextual factor might result to 'incomplete transfer', which happens due to failure to identify and transfer factors that made the policy a success in the country of origin (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

In explaining the Finnish PISA success specially and why Finland is known for having one of the best educational systems generally, valijarvi et al. (2002) note:

> *There is, in fact, no one single explanation for the result. Rather, the successful performance of Finnish students seems to be attributable to a web of interrelated factors having to do with comprehensive pedagogy, students' own interests and leisure activities, the structure of the education system, teacher education, school practices and, in the end, Finnish culture. […] some characteristics of the Finnish education system and our cultural heritage which, both at and outside school, can be thought to have contributed to Finland's successful performance.*

Although Finland's educational system gained international attention and recognition post publication of the PISA 2000s results, Education Finland (2021) highlights the point that although Finland is willing to share its ideas and know-how with the world, it should be remembered that Finland's outstanding results are a culmination of decades of reforms and systematic cooperation with other stakeholders which cannot be simply copied by other countries.

The third challenge related to context is how well policy makers are able to adapt what they borrow to suit their local contexts. The lack of understanding of the local context might lead to 'inappropriate transfer' because of economic, social, political, and ideological differences between the country borrowing the policy and the country lending the policy. It is due to these differences that, Steiner-khamsi (2002, p. 85) emphasis on the 'recontextualization' of borrowed policies and Phillips &

Ochs (2003, p. 452) stress the need for the ‘adaptation and suitability of context’ of a borrowed policy. This means that policy transfer is not a cut and paste practice and not a one size fit all; borrowed policies must be locally adapted to suit the local needs of the people and must be based and built on the local economic, social, political and ideological realities of the borrowing context which is sometimes not adequately taken into account during the transfer process.

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