

Policies that speak discourses? Neo-liberalism, discursive change and European education policy trajectories.

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1. Introduction

Education has traditionally been part of the ‘high politics’, which Member States aim to protect, and is characterized by a weak legal basis for Community action (Wallace 2005; Walkenhorst 2008). However, the European Union’s role in education has expanded significantly in particular since the advent of the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the Bologna process in higher education (1999) and the Copenhagen process for enhanced cooperation in vocational training. Busemeyer and Trampusch (2011) note that political science scholarship on internationalization in education can be grouped into, first, studies on emergent governance mechanisms and policy-making processes at the international level and, second, on the effects of the international on domestic (national) policies, politics and political. This chapter aims to expand this remit to discuss two additional themes: first, the nature and ideological underpinnings of the policies generated by the mechanisms and processes with which the political science literature has been concerned and, second, the effects of stakeholders at various levels on EU education policy, given that EU policies do not emerge in a vacuum themselves. When looking at this second aspect the chapter will go beyond exclusively nation state actors, responding to calls to analyze the state (and EU statehood) through an examination not only of the state’s own processes but also of their broader context and of the conduct of other social and political actors beyond the state (Jessop 2004).

The chapter looks specifically at education and training policies, and excludes related policies such as culture and research policies. I focus particularly on the role of the European Commission’s –the EU’s executive body- in particular. While the Commission is not the only EU institution dealing with education and training, it is central in driving EU policy in this area, and has been the main focus of scholarly research (Souto-Otero 2015).

The chapter is organized as follows: section two reconstructs and presents the mainstream view of the nature of EU education policy; section three questions this standard account, proposing a more complex view, based on what the European Commission *says* and what the EU *does* in education.. The fourth section discusses how we can explain the identified mismatch between education policy texts and actions. Section five looks at Europeanisation processes. Section six concludes.

2. The mainstream view of European education policy

It is widely argued that the Commission’s neo-liberal turn in education has taken place progressively since the 1990s. The interests of the Commission, it is argued, moved from political and cultural aspects to activation, economic competitiveness, employability, a preference for market-based solutions, flexibility, self-reliance and individualization. The 1995 White Paper on “Teaching and learning: Towards the learning society” (European Commission 1995) was the key document articulating DG EAC’s vision of education and training for the 1990s. It presented ‘value development’ as the fundamental purpose of education. When talking about the

results of education and training, the White Paper gave a central role to aspects of cooperation and citizenship. The role of education in improving employment chances was presented as a fundamental but secondary purpose of education:

“The essential aim of education and training has always been personal development and the successful integration of Europeans into society through the sharing of common values, the passing on of cultural heritage and the teaching of self-reliance. However, this essential function of social integration is today under threat unless it is accompanied by the prospect of employment” (European Commission 1995:3-4).

It acknowledged the limitations of education and training as a tool for employment right at the start:

“(…) it is unfair to expect education and training alone to make up for every failure: education and training cannot solve the employment problem on their own or, more generally, the problem of the competitiveness of industries and services” (European Commission 1995:1).

Around that point (mid to late 1990s), the literature argues, the Commission changed its view of education, to become more neo-liberal. Thus, Mitchell (2006) sustains that EU programmes have become more geared to the creation of mobile, flexible and self-governing European laborers and less towards the affirmation of civic awareness or the importance of respect for individual and group differences. Walkenhorst (2008) notes a change from politico-economic to economic-functional goals in the EU education discourse and from pro-integrationism to pro-market orientations, neglecting the identity-creation potential of education to increasingly focus on its economic value. Papatsiba (2014) talks about a shift in EU-education policy from a pro-integrationist towards a pro-market orientation framed by the ideas of the knowledge economy and society, globalisation and competitiveness.

Brine (2006) argues, based on an analysis of EU documents from 1993 to 2005, that these are based on a distinction between ‘high knowledge-skilled learner’ defined as a graduate/ postgraduate fit for the knowledge economy, and a low knowledge-skilled learner, which are constituted as a risk for society. For the most part the texts are gender, class and race free: level of skill is the primary distinction between individuals. Noting the increasing importance of “lifelong learning” in the EU’s discourse, Brine contends that the ‘inherent goodness of lifelong learning masks a discourse of competition, inclusion/ exclusion, stratification and power relations’. The totalisation of learning through lifelong and life-wide learning makes it penetrate all spheres of life -including private and leisure experiences- to reinterpret those experiences in terms of their value in the labour market.

The Commission has not articulated another grand vision of education in a White paper since the 1990s, but the most recent document expressing its strategic vision for education ‘Rethinking education’ presents the role of education as being subordinated to the labour market and economic competitiveness:

“The broad mission of education and training encompasses objectives such as active citizenship, personal development and well-being. While these go hand-in-hand with the need to upgrade skills for employability, against the backdrop of sluggish economic growth and a shrinking workforce due to demographic ageing, the most pressing challenges for Member States are to address the needs of the economy and focus on solutions to tackle fast-rising youth unemployment.” (European Commission 2012a:3)

There is also a different presentation of the potential of education to shape economic growth. Current levels of unemployment are related to previous education failures:

“In the long-term, skills can trigger innovation and growth, (...) and shape the future labour market (...) European education and training systems continue to fall short in providing the right skills for employability” (European Commission 2012a:3).

Consistently with the above views, Scharpf (2002), in its discussion of the European Social Model, argues that the supply-side social model and its associated policies such as improving the skills of the unemployed are consistent with neo-liberal economic thinking. He contends that this is the road followed at the Lisbon summit, whose primary focus for the modernization of the European social model was on education, training, skills and lifelong-learning as means for social inclusion.

3. EU education policy: Discourse and actions

3.1 Introduction

This section questions the reading of European education policy as purely neo-liberal. While EU education policy has moved partly in that direction, the standard account outlined above is too one-sided. The critique of the mainstream argument is based on three premises: first, the co-existence of the neoliberal discourse with alternative discourses in the Commission’s education policies. Second, the ambivalence of EU targets in this area. Third, the neo-liberal view is based, largely, on textual analyses, downplaying the importance of EU regulation and funding actions. The second and third points acknowledge that discourses constrain our possibilities for thought and action (Ball 1994), but also that social actors can use them strategically. Discourses speak through social actors, but actors can also resist discourses implicitly -through their actions- as much as explicitly –in the fight for words and meaning.

3.2 The European Union and education discourses

Jessop (2006) has noted that the EU is an arena for competing societalization projects, with competing identities and values. While the neo-liberal discourse has acquired certain preponderance, it co-exists in tension with other –sometimes contradictory- discourses, in particular a political discourse on the creation of the

European political project and the European citizenship. Citizenship is about rights, but also about identities, values and behaviors, areas in which education has a fundamental role (Kymlicka and Norman 1995). Post-functional theories of regional integration argue that not only economic interests, but also identity are decisive for regional integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009), which makes education important for European institutions. Rising levels of formal education favor European integration through the development of 'cognitive mobilisation' that develops the capacity to relate to remote situations, roles and institutions (Inglehart 1970).

Milana (2008) argues that since the Amsterdam Treaty, which states the rights of European citizenship, there has been an increasing concern with the enhancement of democratic citizenship through education. The key question is what kind of citizen, and citizenship, are being created. Here, the literature is divided. Part of it sees the EU's 'active citizen' discourse as imperialistic, ethno-cultural, exclusive and pro-market (Olson 2012). Hansen (2000) adds to this view arguing that the discourse on European citizenship is part of a neo-liberal agenda that has prevailed since the 1980s, based on ethno-cultural understandings, which tends to exclude non-white and non-Christian populations, based on a sense of belonging to a unitary view of Europe's civilization and heritage. Biesta (2009:146) contends that the EU discourse tends to depoliticize the idea of citizenship because it is based on a consensus view of democracy.

A second strand of the literature acknowledges that the EU-citizen may be an activated lifelong-learning subject –a 'market citizen'- but also a critical 'European' subject and a post-national model of citizenship (Joppke 2010). The EU's citizenship project is seen to try to address the heterogeneity created within the Union through its various enlargements, low turnouts to European elections and a lack of understanding amongst European citizens of what the EU does. Fernandez (2005) sees the notion of EU active citizenship as developing people's critical skills and capacity to make considered judgements over learning and to understand the circumstance of their lives. Keating (2009) contends that since the second World War the EU education policy model has been transformed from an ethno-cultural and ethnocentric national model towards a postnational model of citizenship that aims to unify EU citizens not only on the bases of culture or history but also of values, skills and a shared future. Keating acknowledges that post-national identity discourses can be used in favour of neo-liberal rather than social-democratic values of civic awareness, but puts forward an alternative interpretation that the current EU focus on citizenship education can be conceived as a instrument to counterbalance the most radical excesses of neo-liberalism, or achieve the twin EU goals of developing a knowledge-based economic with social cohesion in democratic states. In addition to its economic project the EU is also a political project of identity construction (Shore 2000).

While early efforts by EU institutions to enhance education about Europe were by and large ignored at the national level Europe and European institutions have become much better represented in national legislation and the school curriculum nowadays (ICF 2013). The main messages at national level are that education should prepare young people for their roles as citizens in their countries and the EU. There

is also scope for identity and political education: in Ireland the main emphasis of the history curriculum for primary school students is that they should ‘develop a growing sense of personal, national, European and wider identities’ (ICF 2013:34); in Sweden, under civic and social studies, “in addition to learning how membership of the EU affects individuals, students also should be taught about the possibility they have as EU citizens to influence political decisions” (ICF 2013:35). It should nevertheless be noted that the extent of coverage of the EU in the curriculum or actual delivery in the classrooms depends largely on teachers’ motivation and personal convictions.

3.3 The OMC and EU targets

A second aspect to consider is the ambivalent character of the education measures the EU has undertaken post-Lisbon. I will discuss this with reference to the Open Method of Coordination. The Open Method of Coordination -the typical governance mode for the lesser integrated policy areas in the EU- is not based on ‘hard laws’ but soft regulation: agreement on policy goals, benchmarks and targets, peer-learning and exchange of good practices, periodic monitoring and evaluation around agreed targets.

The renewed interest in education in EU policy around 2000 –when Europe declared its objective to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council 2000)- and the OMC was adopted provides fuel to the argument that the EU has an instrumentalist view of education. But a look at what the EU committed to work on and prioritise provides an blurred picture in that respect. In 2000 the EU and Member States started working together towards a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training and the achievement of 13 specific goals for education and training (the 2010 education and training work programme: ET2010). These included aspects such as making learning more open, enhancing active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion; improving mobility and exchanges and European cooperation. In 2009 the Commission set out four strategic objectives for education: including improving the quality and efficiency of education and training systems, and promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship (development by all, of competences needed for employability, future learning, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue; high quality inclusive and early education). The priorities for the successor of the ET2010, ET2020, are regularly adapted, but its main themes have so far been consistent with those of ET2010.

In order to measure progress, the Council accompanied the ET2020 objectives with indicators and European benchmarks. The following EU benchmarks for 2020 have been set for education:

- At least 95% of children (from 4 to compulsory school age) should participate in early childhood education
- Fewer than 15% of 15-year-olds should be under-skilled in reading, mathematics and science;

- The rate of early leavers from education and training aged 18-24 should be below 10%
- At least 40% of people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education
- At least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning
- At least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18-34 year olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad;
- The share of employed graduates (aged 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education 1-3 years ago) should be at least 82%.

These continue to a large extent –although in somewhat more ambitious terms- the benchmarks selected for ET2010.

Finally in relation to objectives and benchmarks, one of the five areas for headline targets to measure progress against the EU2020 agenda, which are meant to be one of the major driving forces of EU policy, refers to education and includes two targets:

- Reducing school drop out rates below 10%
- At least 40% of 30-34 year olds completing third level education.

Education is also part of the yearly ‘European semester’ that organizes the implementation of the EU’s economic policy. As part of the European semester the Commission issues country specific recommendations (CSRs) to enhance jobs and growth. DG EAC feeds its input in the process through DG EMPL. Most of the education references in the 2015 CSR background reports focus on the importance of reducing early school leaving, the improvement of basic skills, participation in lifelong learning and the provision of high quality and affordable childcare. There are also frequent references to the education of Roma, migrants or other minorities and disadvantaged groups, including young people not in education, employment or training.

The ET2010, ET2020 and CSRs go beyond strictly economic growth concerns towards investments in early childhood education and a minimum level of basic competences for all. These aspects are also cornerstones of a social-democratic strategy aimed at favouring in particular disadvantaged groups, which the social policy literature distinguishes from neo-liberal approaches (Esping-Andersen 2008). A child-centred investment strategy based on the provisions of high quality childcare services is conducive to increasing maternal employment rates, furthering children’s human capital, reduce social inequalities in early life and were key elements in the rationale of Scandinavian countries development of a service-oriented welfare state in the 1970s. This investment model is expected to produce, at once, individual and collective betterment, because maximization of knowledge is a requirement for competitiveness in the knowledge economy and because investing in children’s life-chances is a necessity for the democratic working of our society (Esping-Andersen 2008). Income redistribution strategies, without investment in children’s education

and development will fail, because the latter is a 'key mechanism behind social inheritance and unequal outcomes' (Esping-Andersen 2006:15).

More generally, Boix (1998:3) distinguished between two strategies to manage the economy, a conservative and a social-democratic strategy. He argues: "the first strategy consists in reducing taxes to encourage private savings, boost private investment, and accelerate the rate of growth. Lower taxes, however, may imply at least in the short run, less social spending and more inequality." In the social-democratic strategy the state increases public spending in human and fixed capital to raise the productivity rate of labour and capital: this should encourage private agents to keep investing even in the face of high taxation (needed to pay for social transfers and public investment programmes)". Nurturing the association between education and economic growth is not the exclusive property of neo-liberalism, and this social-democratic Keynesian paradigm coexists 'in tension' with neo-liberal views within DG Education and Culture (DG EAC) (Mitchell 2006:394).

While the education literature criticizes the compulsion to educate oneself derived from the lifelong learning discourse, the social policy literature puts greater emphasis on the balance between entitlements and obligations. Room (2002:46) notes that in order to achieve what he calls a 'minimum learning platform' through a citizenship entitlement to post-compulsory education may require also 'an obligation placed on the individual to purpose learning and self-development through life'. He declares that under certain conditions this would amount to a 'radically egalitarian strategy'.

The objectives and targets the EU has set in education have more than one reading. They have, at least, a dual character: they respond to the need for a qualified workforce for economic competitiveness but also a well-educated citizenship that can make informed decisions in a complex world. They can be seen as part of a strategy that aims to better redistribute life-chances. Half of the ET2020 benchmarks and one of the ET2020 targets can be related to the 'minimum human capital guarantee' called for in the social policy literature (Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes 2000; Esping-Andersen 2008), and most of the other ET2020 and EU2020 targets and goals align with the social-democratic strategy for growth outlined by Boix (1998).

3.4 EU education programmes

Funding programmes are an essential component of what the EU and DG EAC do. DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion's (hereafter DG Employment) European Social Funds address labour market concerns. However, Mitchell (2006:394) argues that they illustrate that the social-democratic project still exists in the EU, because their role in geographical redistribution. In the period 2013-2020 the allocation for the ESF will be in the region of 75 billion in current prices (around 10% of the EU budget). Roughly a third of this is devoted to human capital investments. In this area ESF funds many activities to combat early school leaving and to provide opportunities for re-entry into formal training or education.

The EU has been increasing the budget of EAC's programmes significantly, although arguably starting from a low base that did not match the profile of this policy area in a 'knowledge economy'. DG EAC's Creative Europe programme (2014-2020) – that supports the cultural and creative sectors - recently secured significant budgetary increases, from 400 million Euros for its predecessor the Culture Programme (2007-2013) to 1.46 billion. The main education and training programmes of DG EAC had a budget of around 3 billion for 2000-2006, around 7 billion for 2007-2013 (Walkenhorst 2008) and around 15 billion for the period 2014-2020 under its Erasmus+ programme. This contrasts with the impact of the crisis on educational budgets in many EU countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2013).

Mitchell (2006) argues that from the 2000s new programme priorities focus on the mobility needed for economic success rather than on the formation of a democratic person, and on retraining rather than curricula for civic education and culture. Walkenhorst (2008) by contrast, concedes that not all features of EU policy are pro-market and notes that EU programmes continue their classical cooperation aims through exchanges, funding schemes and information provision. Erasmus+ continues to focus, fundamentally, on the exchange of good practices and student and staff mobility, as its predecessors (Erasmus, Grundtvig, Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius, etc.) did. It has amounted to an incremental and organizational change, rather than a radical change in the types of activity implemented. At least 63% of its budget is ring-fenced for learning mobility of individuals (staff and students, joint Masters, student loan guarantee, volunteering and youth exchanges). Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices has an allocation of at least 28%. Ring-fenced funds concentrate chiefly on higher education (over 40% of the funds) - followed by VET (22%) and schools (15%).

The emphasis is thus on exchange in higher education, and this emphasis is even stronger than in the past – a change for which the Commission pushed strongly in the programme budget negotiations. As such, the Erasmus initiative for mobility in higher education –created in 1987- receives much of the Erasmus+ investment. Erasmus is one of the most visible and successful EU programmes in the eyes of the public (Sigalas 2010; European Commission 2012b). It has various goals related to the internationalization of higher education institutions, skills development and employability enhancement. But Erasmus' rationale and expected benefits surpass narrow economic instrumentalism expanding to notions of citizenship, identity and attitudinal changes about Europe (Souto-Otero 2008). A lively empirical literature based on data from student surveys has emerged testing whether Erasmus indeed affects participants' identity and attachment to Europe as expected by EU institutions. King and Ruiz-Galices (2003), Van Mol (2011) report that participation in the programme results in changes in the personal development, self-identity of students and their European identity, whereas Sigalas (2010) and Wilson (2011) are more skeptic, partly because Erasmus students are already strong supporters of the EU prior to their participation in the programme. Most of these studies, however, suffered from small and geographically limited samples (predominantly British Erasmus and non-Erasmus students, and Erasmus students from other nationalities who decided to study in the UK).

More recent studies making use of larger samples from a wider set of countries also give contradictory results. CHE Consult (2014) revealed a slight decrease in the attachment to Europe, following participation in the programme, which may be explained because living abroad provides information on the problems faced by the European project. Mitchell (2012:511) reports that Erasmus students become more interested in Europe and enhance their self-identity as Europeans during their participation in the programme: “If we should not overstate the civic potential of Erasmus study, neither should we minimise it”. Kuhn (2012) argues that if participation in the Erasmus programme does not strengthen European identity this does not necessarily imply that transnational mobility is ineffective in fostering it. Rather, the Erasmus programme misses its mark because transnational mobility experiences have a greater impact in structuring European identity among low-educated than among highly educated individuals.

Regardless of its effectiveness, both its users and the EU go beyond economic-functional arguments in their conceptions of the Erasmus programme. King and Gelices (2003) and CHE (2014) report that students defined the benefits from participation mainly in terms of linguistic competence, cultural experience and personal development, and only later in terms of career prospects and academic learning. Bruter saw student exchange programmes “to propose a new ‘Social Contract’ to European citizens, and to develop a new mass European identity rather than let citizens be mere ‘consumers’ of the economic benefits associated with Europe” (2005:73-74).

It is difficult to see a univocal link between actions such as student mobility, the creation of academic networks the stimulation of cooperation between institutions and pure neo-liberal goals on the other. This is also the case regarding the EU’s emphasis in investment in early years education and young people and the reduction of early school leaving.

4. Exploring the mismatch: changing texts and persisting actions

This section discusses two factors (DG EAC’s fight for legitimacy, survival and relevance and –related to this- the audiences of its education discourses) that can help explain the identified mismatch between education policy texts and actions, as well as the possibility of different interpretations of the European texts, as documented in section 3.

The first factor to take into account is the expanding role of DG EAC, and its quest for legitimacy, survival and voice. Much of the initial work of the EU in education and training referred strictly to labour market issues, mobility of workers and recognition of professional qualifications. Only more recently expanded to a wider set of concerns with mobility, identity or equality. Since the 2000s these concerns may seem to have diminished status not because they have lost their importance

compared to the 1990s, but because EAC's texts have linked its actions in those areas to employment in a clearer and more frequent way than before. This has not only been EAC's free choice, but part of a battle for relevance and voice under the Lisbon strategy. Part of the challenge for EAC is that it is not the only DG whose remit is moving. Gradually, EU employment policy has expanded to incorporate aspects of human capital formation and management too. This became evident in the 2014 transfer of parts of DG EAC dealing with Skills and Qualifications and Vocational Training and Adult Employment Policy to DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. In this context EAC needs to show that it is in tune with the interests of the high management of the Commission not only to expand its remit, but even to remain still. In its own account of the history of European education policies, the European Commission (2006) notes that by making education closer to employment and competitiveness policies in the early 2000s: "the ministers for education would (...) be able to make themselves heard, more vigorously and more consistently than in the past, alongside ministers whose portfolios are more 'dominant' in the Lisbon strategy, such as the economy and employment" (European Commission 2006:207). But DG EAC is aware that there is a "constant risk" that education becomes "seen only in terms of its economic and employment implications" (European Commission 2006:211).

This brings us to discussions on the second factor: the audience of DG EAC's discourses. There is some danger in reading European Commission education documents as a true reflection of its thinking and intentions, without devoting due attention to their audience. European education policy analysis has explored the interplay between European institutions and Member States in-depth, looking in particular at the impact of EU policy at the national level (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011). But the heterogeneity of stakeholders involved in EU governance practices stretches well beyond the Member States' political apparatus. The EU is influenced, guided, constrained and supported by a myriad of stakeholders. Rather than interaction between the European and the national level there are interactions between the Global (G), European (E), National (N) and Institutional/ Individual (I) levels -a 'GENI' model of policy-making.

DG EAC interacts with parts of other international organisations, such as the OECD, IMF, World Bank and above all the WTO. Most of these are seen to operate within a framework of "embedded neo-liberalism", given the limitations of their social agendas (Robertson et al. 2002). International organisations collaborate but they also compete for the attention of and influence over the agendas and policies of countries (Grek 2013). While the European Commission sees its work as being more social and democratically oriented than the work of other international organisations (such as the OECD, IMF, World Bank or WTO), which are more focused on economic development, it is also influenced by them, and needs to take their narratives into account when positioning itself in the international debates. The Council of Europe and UNESCO have more marked concerns with notions of culture, inclusion and development in education. However the OECD, IMF, World Bank and WTO are more powerful organisations than the Council of Europe and UNESCO, and the discourse of the EU has been getting closer to them.

The EU is not a unitary actor itself. The various institutions concerned with EU policy-making (the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Council, the European Parliament) have diverse approaches to education and training. The European Council is particularly important as it defines the EU's general political direction and priorities, and its conclusions increasingly include references to the importance of education and training for economic recovery and employment. In its own account of the history of EU's education policy, the Commission uses unusually strong language to refer to the actions of other EU institutions, declaring that the European Council had "watered down" Commission proposals, for example regarding investment in education (European Commission 2006:217). It also criticised the work of the high-level group set by the European Council to prepare a mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy (the 'Kok group'), for its limited approach to education. This was "too limited to the needs of the labour market and suffered from being less coherent and comprehensive than the approach 'from the cradle to the grave' previously promoted by the Commission" (European Commission 2006:224).

Within the Commission, DG Employment has a major role in education and training and also a more instrumental view of education than DG EAC, and is a major competitor for DG EAC's portfolio. More broadly, major Commission policies –in particular those with financial implications- now need to be approved by an Impact Assessment Board that includes high-ranking officials from different parts of the Commission. In order to be persuasive DGs need to select evidence to support their case in front of the IA Board and other European institutions with this particular audience in mind: busy policy-makers that are they need lend support to its proposals (Souto-Otero 2013). This provides an incentive to employ arguments that are simple, familiar or at least intuitive and supported by quantification of net benefits to appeal to non-specialists at first glance and secure support. 'Education is worthwhile' or even "Citizenship education will reduce social conflict" will not do as the main bases for EU action in education. Showing a 'bottom line' that will resonate with those stakeholders is more easily accomplished with regards to employment matters. Employment is the overriding social policy priority for Member States and the Commission, and DG EAC has felt increasing pressure to show –at least rhetorically- its contribution to the 'activation' of the EU's population.

Regarding the national level Trondal (2002) argues that EU research and higher education policies rest primarily on instrumental and utilitarian rationales, but makes the point that this is in line with the situation in Member States. The European Commission (2003) has criticized Member States because their vision of education is "overly concerned with the requirements of employability or an over-exclusive emphasis on rescuing those who slipped through the initial education nets. This is perfectly justifiable, but does not on its own constitute a lifelong learning strategy which is genuinely integrated, coherent and accessible to everyone". But the EU does not challenge in fundamental ways the sovereignty of Member States in education and training: what cannot be framed in a way that could be accepted at

the domestic level will normally not be pushed for and worked on at the international level.

Gornitzka (2015) argues that in order to understand EU policy we need to look beyond the formal discussions between EU institutions and Member States. She studies participation in the European Commission 'expert groups', which support the Commission in the preparation of its policies. She reports that DG EAC's approach can be characterized as an "all-in policy-making", given the profuse representation of multiple groups. Academics and scientists and competent national authorities/agencies are highly represented. There is also a high degree of representation of NGOs and social partners and unions (such as ETUC, CEEP, and Business Europe, much higher than for DG Research, and similar to DG Employment) compared to other DGs. While there are other avenues for participation in EU education policy than participation in expert groups and participation in experts' groups does not equal influence over policy outcomes, Gornitzka's analysis lends some support to the importance of the institutional and social partner level for DG EAC. Academic organisations tend to defend liberal views of education. They pushed to increase the prominence of cultural and social aspects in EU policy after increasing references to the 'human resource' aspects of education in the 1990s (Commission Européenne, 1993:13), and continue to support this view. Corbett (2005) underlines the importance of the academic community and university associations in the creation of Erasmus, and notes how already then the emphasis of the economic rationale and implications of Erasmus was an initial tactic to ensure acceptance of the programme by the Commissioners.

The Commission also links directly with citizens and educational institutions through various means, including consultations, the production of European tools (such as the European CV), reference frameworks (for example the European Qualifications Framework), and through its funding programmes. And the Commission clearly aims to win the support of the public for its actions. The link between education and employment does not exist only in European and national policy documents, also in public opinion: a recent Eurobarometer survey shows that 48% of respondents cited 'improve education and professional training' as an initiative that could improve the performance of the economy (European Commission 2011). It featured above aspects such as reducing public deficits and debt, making it easier to set up a business or enhancing regulation of financial markets. The public, however, also defends the non-economic value of education, as illustrated by the discussion on the Erasmus programme.

DG EAC is in a position where it receives pressures from various fronts to show the economic results that education can bring about. The discourses of international organisations and Member States are geared towards economic returns, and these are particularly important stakeholders for EAC's policy-making. In order to make sense of the mismatch between EAC's rhetorical transformation and its complex and at points contradictory underlying discourses and practices it would be useful to employ constructivist dramaturgical approaches (Goffman 1959), underused in the analysis of international social policy. Goffman shows how social actors use (and

strategically manipulate) cultural schemata and social rules for their advantage. Following Goffman, we can look at the neo-liberal discourse as a 'frame', which provides a diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic, a solution to the diagnosed problem and a rationale for engaging in corrective action. Acceptance of frames depends largely on the degree to which they resonate with the values and beliefs of their expected target groups, thus social actors may undertake frame alignment processes, which aim to link their frames with those of their target population (Snow and Benford 1988). For EAC, Member States and international organisations' frames are particularly important. But alignment with a framework –Goffman surmises- does not imply agreement over 'what exists'; rather it is agreement over whose claims/ frames will be temporarily accepted and the desirability or not of conflict over the definition of the situation (Schimmelfennig 2002).

This may help to explain the dissonance between EAC's increasing neo-liberal discourse –most evident in high profile policy documents directed to other institutions, more interlinked with other discourses in more operational documents- and its change of framing for its, largely constant and ambiguous from a political economy point of view, actions. Goffman provides an explanation of how a social and moral order (in this case an emerging neo-liberal consensus in educational narratives) is possible without the actor's (DG EAC's) internalization of cultural values and norms of their social environment. Social actors, nevertheless, act as if they did internalize cultural values –in EAC's case, overemphasizing the economic role of education in its key policy documents. Social credibility depends on the kind of performance that is carried out, and the consistency between performance and the norms that are defended. Inconsistency leads to embarrassment and even breakdown of the interaction (Goffman 1959). EAC has adapted some of its work, policies and actions according to the new dominant discourse, but allegedly, in uneven and partial ways.

To sum-up, the Commission seeks acceptance and legitimisation through discursive alignment with Member States and international organisations (its core constituency) official discourses, values and norms. This self-representation provides the EU with augmented bargaining power. Education policies' dual character (economic and social/ integrative) has enabled EAC to reconcile its main discourse, subsidiary discourses and 'constant' practices.

5. Europeanisation

The focus of this chapter has been largely on the interplay between discourse and actions in EU education policy, and their genesis. This is not to deny the importance of the analysis of the effects of the European on domestic policies, politics and politics of Member States -or indeed beyond Member States (Voegtler et al. 2010). Europeanisation, or the impact of European integration on Member States, is an important area of research for European education policy, as should be the interaction between the processes of European integration and Europeanisation; so

while this is not the main focus of this chapter, a few reflections on Europeanisation are warranted here.

Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) outline a range of different conditions, or mediating circumstances, that affect the extent to which impact may be produced: the policy problems that establish the need for change, the 'goodness of fit' of proposed solutions with national policies, actors' preferences, countries' institutional and political capacity to act and policy discourses. But they also warn about the adoption of an exclusive focus on the impact of EU policies at the national level, looking at the degree to which EU policies are implemented, presenting a "managerial, chain-of-command logic" (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004:190). As this chapter has argued, things are far more complex –due, amongst other reasons, to the input of Member States in the discourse and design of EU policies and their role in supporting them or otherwise.

It should also be noted that while the study of the impact of the EU on Member States is often undertaken with reference to the notion of 'compliance'. In this context, it is important to note that when the EU can ask for compliance –because of its legal competences- there are different rules of compliance, from highly specified to less specified rules that may allow greater leeway and room for interpretation (Schmidt 2002). "EU policies themselves exercise different degrees of institutional pressure for change on member states" and have different impact on Member States depending on the mediating circumstances that they face (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004:190; Souto-Otero et al. 2008).

Hadjisoteriou et al. (2015) report that even when Member States develop education policies according to the guidelines of the EU, these policies can be counteracted by practice. This suggests that a distinction should be made between textual and practical compliance. Textual compliance, in addition, may be formal or substantive: when the EU vocabulary is accepted in national policy discussions or documents, Member States may or may not share the meaning attached to that vocabulary by the EU and may attribute it different and sometimes conflicting meanings. Allemann-Ghionda and Deloitte (2008:43) refer to EU's challenge to "bridge the increasing gap between some national policies and the European policy" that is subsumed under the label of intercultural education.

Compliance is not the only possible framework for the analysis of Europeanisation processes, or even the most appropriate. Discourses and EU funding programmes in education escape the logic of compliance; they are guided by the logics of acceptance and participation. Keating et al. (2009) discuss how European discourses have led Member States to consider reforming their curricula in the area of citizenship education. Other EU actions, such as benchmarks do not demand 'compliance' but generic 'effort' and commitment to meet them. These efforts may be incentivized by the EU. For Hadjisoteriou et al. (2015) the development of European targets provides an incentive for Member States to align their strategic plans in certain education areas (for example early school leaving, a priority for the EU) to those targets in order to maximise the opportunities provided by EU financial

instruments. In this way programmes can be used for the diffusion of ideas at the national level. Commitment to EU programme ideas is financially, as well as rhetorically, rewarded.

In addition to this, it is not clear that producing “effects” at the national level – Europeanising national systems and practices- is the main priority for EU education policy-makers, or even that it could be, given the limited EU competences in education (Souto-Otero 2011). Instead, the creation of something that transcends Member States, of a European education space and actions becomes an objective in itself. Keeling argues, looking at the European discourse on higher education, that “it would seem that it is the European Commission itself which is a prime beneficiary of the higher education discourse it is helping to shape (...) [confirming] higher education as a key sphere of operation for the EU” (Keeling 2006:215). According to Keeling the EU higher education discourse proposes ‘fields of debate’ rather than cohesive policies. Often the EU tries to have an impact on the policy agenda, rather than set actions to follow, and that can be seen as an aim in itself.

Although impact may be tangential or non-existing in many cases, there are, nevertheless, various mechanisms through which impact has been produced on policy and practice at Member State and at institutional level. European education programmes, for example, have transformed not only strategic priorities –as discussed above- but also higher education institutions’ approaches to internationalization of teaching and research, curricula, quality assurance, student services and organization and management (CHE Consult 2014; Vossensteyn et al. 2008). Institutional impacts matter in themselves, but they can also create new pressures for change at the national level and facilitate policy-learning (Beerkens and Vossensteyn 2011; Brakel et al. 2004). Similarly, European benchmarks and policy cooperation activities have been reported to be consequential at the national level (Lange and Alexiadou 2010; Keating et al. 2009; Souto-Otero et al. 2008), although not in a uniform way across countries (Alexiadou and Lange 2013; Grek and Ozga 2010; Simons 2007). An example of this is Grek et al. (2009:4) analysis of the use of education data in various European countries, which concludes that “policy-makers seek international education indicators in order to build education plans that are legitimized by a kind of ‘comparative global enterprise’” –see also Capano and Piattoni 2011.

The OMC, exchange of best practices/ diffusion of ideas through funding programmes, monitoring and assessment are mechanisms through which the EU seeks to influence Member States’ agendas, policies and practices at the same time that it follows its own institutional agenda and expansion of competences in the area of education. Dale (1999) identifies a range of mechanisms through which globalization can produce effects on national policy, which may also be applicable to EU discourse and actions; further research on their applicability and relative success in bringing about “effects” –on national discourses, national policies and on the EU’s institutional agenda- would be beneficial.

6. Conclusions

The chapter argues that the alleged preponderance of the neo-liberal discourse in EU education policy cannot be looked at in isolation, but needs to take into account the existence of multiple EU actions in education, constituencies of EU education policy and purposes of education. Once this is done, the singlehanded dominance of the neo-liberal discourse can be brought into question. The EU coordinates sometimes contradictory demands: global, European and national actors tend to underline the economic value of education, whereas institutional and individual views tend to give a greater role to personal development, cultural and social aspects. This is done through three strategies: (1) the inclusion of alternative discourses on education (for example on productivity, competition, active citizenship and the creation of socio-political spaces and identities) in EU policy documents –this is enabled by the multiple purposes of education actions, although the result is not always coherent-; (2) the adoption of targets that have an ambiguous character (capable of satisfying both neo-liberal and social-democratic audiences); (3) maintenance of the core actions of EU programmes in spite of rhetorical movements, and (4) the reconciliation of divergence between rhetoric and action through re-definitional work of its activities, frame alignment and veneer consensus.

EU education policy has been looked at, primarily, through the examination of policy documents (Brine 2006, Mitchell 2006, Walkenhorst 2008). These analyses conclude that European education policies are neo-liberal economic and social policies, which put the job preparation purpose of education at the front. To be sure, DG EAC documents often underline the importance of economic and labour market rationales when discussing education policies, and more so in recent years. But most analyses tend to ignore that the EAC's discourse is a public discourse and the interlocutors in the discourse –most notably international organizations, EU Member States and the Commission as a complex policy actor- are essential to interpret it. While the study of discourse is no doubt important, policy is 'both text and actions, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended' (Ball 1994:10). I have argued that it is not only discourses that 'speak through policies', but that political actors and policies can also 'speak discourses', selectively adapting to them to achieve strategic aims, such as survival, stability or expansion. Discourse is important because it contributes to the establishment of possibilities for thought and action. But it cannot be assumed that the link between discourse and policy is univocal: it is also a terrain for struggle, debate, interpretation and strategic behaviour. Discourse describe and shape reality, but do not determine it; they constrains social actors, but also provide them with resources and opportunities. There has been much more emphasis on what the EU says than on what it does in education, and this practical dimension needs to be included in the analysis.

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