PISA, Power and RE

Theoretical and empirical observations on the emergence of global educational governance and its impact on Religious Education

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Introduction

This paper is about theoretical and empirical observations on the emergence of global educational governance and its impact on Religious Education. Three examples of global educational governance are introduced, as well as some theoretical concepts and empirical findings.

Global educational governance is an issue for policy and research. The term expresses the fact that the transnational level has become a policy-relevant sphere for national education. Some speak of an international education regime (Parreira do Amaral, 2011), or an international knowledge economy (Ball 2008; Hirtt 2011). Meyer & Benavot describe shifts in education governance as:"growing markets, shrinking states" (2013, 11).

The debate includes critical voices on initiatives such as PISA that is linked with the risk of promoting a "worldwide educational standardization for the sake of hitching schools more tightly to the bandwagon of economic efficiency, while sacrificing their role of preparing students for independent thinking and civic participation" (Meyer & Benavot 2013, 9).

1. Three examples of global educational governance

As examples of global modes of education governance I use the OECD with its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the European Union with its initiatives to make education and training an issue of European integration (Europe 2020) and the Council of Europe with its recommendations and projects in education. These institutions are important players in the field of a global educational governance using different instruments such as surveys and data, soft mechanisms (eg. open method of coordination) and recommendations. Global educational governance fosters a trend of economisation of education, competition of existing national approaches, but promotes partly also social cohesion, justice and citizenship as aims of education. The research question is in how far these organisations and the mentioned programmes and initiatives contribute to global educational governance and on their impact on religion and religious education.

OECD and PISA

PISA is initiated by the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, under the general slogan: "Better Politics for a better life." Reasons to establish PISA were the need of empirical data concerning excellence and equity as outcome of education systems. It is a worldwide empirical based monitoring system about competencies of 15-year-old and gives feedback for education systems.

Main areas are: Mathematics, reading literacy and science. In 2012 the main focus was on mathematics and a special survey on creative problem solving competence. It becomes important where in the competition a country is ranked. Average or low level is not what is expected. In some countries PISA became a driving force for educational reforms. PISA is an instrument of a growing impact of the OECD on policy and practice in secondary schooling, encouraging many countries to focus on lifting their PISA scores.

Scholars have identified several paradoxes of PISA.
"1. The first paradox is that PISA has thrown a country to the top of the international ranking charts that least follows the OECD's 'standards global reform package' - i.e. an accountability-driven and standardized-test based model of global education (Sahlberg 2011).
2. The second paradox is that PISA is a key instrument in the construction of a new governance regime that is widely embraced by the very governments that it disempowers.
3. The third paradox is that PISA outcomes are widely read as indicative of intentional educational policies and practices, despite evidence that out-of-school or non-educational factors rival or overshadow school-internal ones.
4. The fourth paradox is that similar PISA outcomes may trigger very dissimilar policy responses on the ground." (Meyer & Benavot 2013, 14–15)

EU: European Education Policy on lifelong learning

The EU has a focus on research and development, education and lifelong learning as part of the EU 2020 strategy on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (EU 2020).

Main objectives are employability, flexibility and mobility. The *EU communication:*

Rethinking Education Strategies expresses the following concern:

> European education and training systems continue to fall short in providing the right skills for employability, and are not working adequately with business or employers to bring the learning experience closer to the reality of the working environment. These skills mismatches are a growing concern for European industry's competitiveness. (European Commission, 2012, 2)

Employability and competitiveness are key concerns of this statement. Education is functionalised for these purposes. A consequence of this situation can be twofold: To analyse carefully institutions, initiatives, instruments, and dynamics and to reflect this in the discourse about religious education.

The *open method of coordination* (OMC) was introduced as an instrument. It consists of the following characteristics:

- Fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables
- Establishing indicators and benchmarks
- Translating European guidelines into national and regional policies
- Periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review as mutual learning processes.

Summary: The place of education in European education policy (Dale, 2009, 40)

Hegemonic project	Place of Education	Mechanism	Implications for /drivers of education governance
Constructing Europe Economically Politically Culturally	Open Method of Coordination OMC as programme ontology	Common EU policy paradigm and taxonomies	?Parallel? European and national 'education' sectors

Critique: The EU concept of education is mainly oriented on economic needs. Employability, flexibility and mobility dominate and marginalise other mentioned aims of education such as the promotion of justice, social cohesion and active citizenship (European Union 2009).

Council of Europe and the religious dimension

Based on the three pillars of democracy, human rights and the rule of law the Council of Europe has been active in education from its very beginning. History education, language policy, EDC, intercultural education are main areas of concern and activities for the cooperation with the 47 member states.

In a qualitative analysis of documents from the Council of Europe the role and place of religion has been analysed. This includes recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly on education and religion and initiatives in intercultural dialogue and education taking account of the religious dimension.

Two findings shall be higlighted here:

Firstly the Council of Europe follows a comprehensive concept of education that promotes four general purposes:

- – Preparation for sustainable employment;
- – Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- – Personal development;
- – The development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.
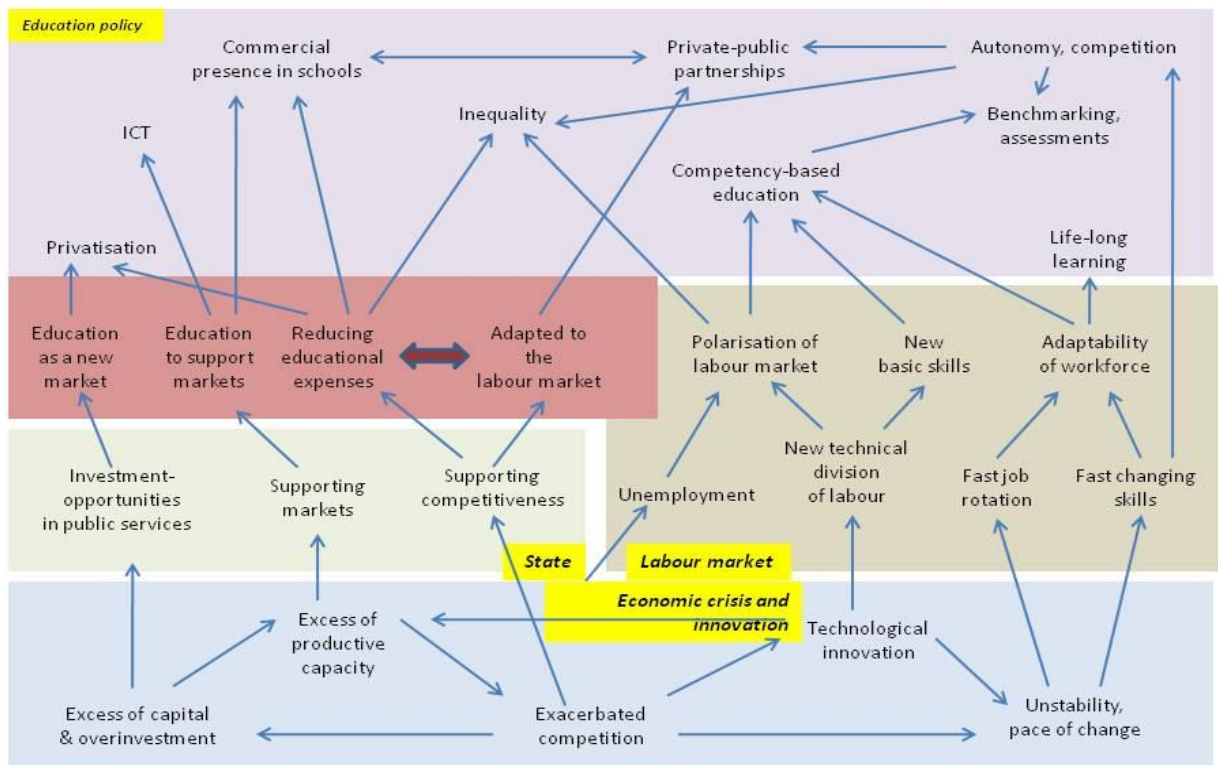
Secondly a more differentiated perception of religion in European society emerges and the religious communities are valued as partners of the European institutions with a reliable potential to promote democratic developments in Europe (Schreiner, 2012, 351). The Council of Europe has launched initiatives to implement the "religious dimension" in intercultural education. The latest product is a document with the title: "Signposts. Policy and Practice for teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education" written by Robert Jackson on behalf of a joint expert group of the CoE and the European Wergeland Centre in Oslo (Jackson & Council of Europe 2014).

The Council of Europe is becoming aware of religion and of teaching about religion as an important area for intercultural understanding, democracy and education for democratic citizenship.

Summarizing the examples we can state, according to Hirtt (2011), that the "material circumstances in the capitalist economiy" (p. 5) push the education systems in advanced capitalist countries towards marketisation. The concept of marketisation should be understood in a broad sense: It means not only increasing privatisation,

transforming education into new markets; it also means a narrow adaptation of education to the specific demands of labour markets; and it means using education systems as an instrument to stimulate same markets, especially the ICT-markets. A survey of Hirtt shows the complexity of related processes and dynamics.

Tableau of relations between economic crisis and education policy today – (Nico Hirtt) – 5

2. Global Educational governance - theoretical and empirical observations

Theories to understand and analyse global educational governance come from different disciplines such as political science, social science and comparative education. Concepts of neo institutionalism and the world polity approach are taken up in comparative education and also on Europeanisation and globalisation as well as on globalised religion (Simojoki 2012). All share a concern to explain how international organisations can have influence on sovereign national states.

Neo-institutionalism and world polity approach

This theoretical approach refers to an isomorphic structure of a worldwide cultural frame based on western societies and ideology. In the field of education converging curricula and school concepts are used as examples (Meyer & Ramirez 2005). A critical view on this approach mentions that issues about power and imbalance in power should be taken up more carefully (Adick 2003).

Europeanisation

The concept of Europeanisation (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003; Börzel, 2005; Graziano & Vink, 2007) reflects the complexity of processes of European integration, including direct effects of EU policy and the Council of Europe's recommendations on domestic change in education. There is consideration of *vertical* and *horizontal* processes of Europeanisation (Beck & Grande, 2004). It is a *dynamic process oriented term* focused on the interplay of the different levels and spheres. Europeanisation may be seen as working through three kinds of mechanisms, which interact synergistically:

> *legal obligations* in political and economic domains flowing from the requirements for accession to the EU, and/or from Council of Europe membership and accession to its Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom;
>
> *objective changes* in economic structures and the interests of individuals as a result of integration with Europe; and
>
> *subjective changes* in the beliefs, expectations and identity of the individual, feeding political will to adopt European norms of business, politics and civil society. (cf. Emerson & Noutcheva, 2004: 4)

In the EU context, Europeanisation describes an interactive process in which member states, affected by the process of European integration, are at the same time players who initiate and shape the process and collaborate with the EU.

Globalisation

A third approach refers to globalisation. Geir Afdal has discussed effects of globalization on education and RE research. His aim is "to contribute to a critical self-reflection on research in religious education under the pressure of globalization." (p.

136) He is using the concept of discourse as theoretical framework and a broad concept of globalization:

> "Globalization is seen not as merely an economic process, but as also involving, for instance, politics, culture and religion. Furthermore it is not only a variety of social processes; it affects people's sense of connections. Globalization consists of the processes that create a situation of globality. This situation constitutes one of the conditions for societal and human understanding and action in a variety of countries and regions." (Afdal 2010, 137)

Henrik Simojoki (2012) has published a study on "Globalised religion" where he argues for taking account the increasing transnational dynamics concerning religion and education.

3. Impact on Religious Education

A general relation between education and religion can be found in Council of Europe documents as well as criteria and expectations concerning teaching about religion and concepts of religious education. Preference of the Council is expressed for a knowledge-based concept of "teaching about religions". The existing range of models of religious education in Europe is not identified or discussed. The relation of education and religion is not an explicit policy issue of the EU, although it is from time to time a subject in the dialogue with churches and religious communities.

Summarising findings one can say that on the one hand religious communities are seen as valid partners of political institutions within civil society, if they follow existing political conditions and frameworks. The danger of a functionalised perception of religion and religious communities has to be carefully recognised in this context. On the other hand the relationship of religion, democracy and society is seen as complex. This can be documented in the following slightly antagonistic findings:

- Religion fades away, but receives increasing importance in society.
- Religion is a private matter, but becomes increasingly an issue in the public sphere.
- Religion is a cultural fact, but for many, religion is a way of life, an embodiment of revealed truth or linked to important ethical convictions.

Perspectives include a plea for a more differentiated perception of religion and space for churches and religions in the public sphere to engage in dialogue with other institutions within civil society, and to shape collaboration between state and religion.

This can also prevent an instrumentalisation of religious communities for political interests.

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