

# **Policy and Administration as Culture: Organizational Sociology and Cross-National Education Trends\***

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## **Abstract**

The study of public policy and administration, including research on education, has long been dominated by assumptions rooted in the disciplines of politics and management. Politically-oriented research focuses on causal processes driven by power and self-interest, looking at sources of inequality and hegemony. Research using a management lens emphasizes economic notions of robust individual capacity for strategic and self-interested action, focusing on function and efficiency. Although some phenomena are well-described by these views, they overlook important elements of global educational administration and policy that are best understood through a cultural lens. Core features of contemporary policy and administration, such as privatization and the rise of network forms of governance, are not fully explained by ideas of power or function. Using examples from education, I show that a cultural explanatory framework, drawn from recent developments in organizational sociology, can provide additional insights into the most pressing global administrative and policy issues.

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Over the twentieth century, education emerged as a central social, political, and economic concern in countries worldwide. Today its structures span government, business, and civil society sectors and bridge local, national, and international levels. Education is a core administrative and policy task of every government, and it is the focus of a great many intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including rising numbers of private businesses.<sup>i</sup> Despite the central role of education in countries around the world and in the international system, our understanding of recent transnational administrative and policy trends pushing privatization and new forms of regulation has been handicapped by a conceptual narrowness.

Theories of public policy and administration emerged from political science and management, and research remains dominated by the questions and assumptions of these disciplines. The study of politics typically focus on causal explanations rooted in power and agency, while management research focuses on economic emphases on function and efficiency; one or both of these views characterize most public administration and policy research, including studies of education. While useful in some ways, these approaches overlook important elements of administration and policy that are best understood through a cultural lens. In particular, the behaviors of actors, including individuals and the organizations and countries they inhabit and construct, are often largely shaped by beliefs about appropriate and legitimate actions rather than by their power (or lack of it), *a priori* self-interests, or certainty about the efficacy of their actions.

In a pointed call for scholars of all public issues to broaden their intellectual terrain, Kelman recommended turning to sociological studies of organization: “The emergence of organization studies in social psychology and sociology created a need and an opportunity for public administration scholars to reach out...The field failed to do this; instead, it retreated inward” (2007, 232). In part, this essay is a response to Kelman’s appeal. It seeks to bring the insights of sociological analyses of organizations to bear on issues of public administration and policy. It diverges, however, in that he advocates a turn towards managerial emphases on performance in public organizations. Perhaps unlike other public sectors, in the context of education there is a thriving body of work focused on performance, especially in the form of studies of achievement and attainment. The conceptual limitations of studies of educational policy and administration are not related to a lack of attention to performance; instead they come from an over-emphasis on power and efficiency and an under-emphasis on culture as explanations of core features of educational policy and administration.

This chapter gives a sociological explanation for emergent transnational features of contemporary educational policy and administration. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of early and recent conceptual tenets of sociological or organizational institutionalism, which has become one of the most dominant approaches to the study of organizations in sociology.<sup>ii</sup> Subsequently, I outline how recent developments in this view shed light on contemporary trends in global educational policy and administration. Following, I discuss why

institutionalism is relatively unknown in policy and administration research and conclude with an overview of the insights it can provide.

### **The Neoinstitutional Approach**

Neoinstitutionalism emerged in the 1970s mainly in opposition to functional economic and power-based views of organization that imagine social structures to be the optimal solution for achieving some end, be it efficiency or elite interests. It argues that features of formal organization, such as educational policies and administrative practices, diffuse as a cultural matter. As culture, formal structures spread beyond functional requirements and in ways that are not obvious reflections of aggregated self-interests or to the benefit of elites and not necessarily most efficient. And, with social and cultural globalization, formal structures diffuse worldwide (Meyer et al 1997).

This approach calls attention to how the external environment socially constructs actors, providing templates or blueprints for legitimate formal structures and policies.<sup>iii</sup> As explained by DiMaggio and Powell: “The new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations, and an interest in properties of supraindividual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals’ attributes or motives” (1991, 8). In a foundational paper, Meyer and Rowan (1977) set out a view of complex organizations in post-industrial society as reflecting cultural beliefs in the institutional environment rather than the technical demands of production. As the environment impinges on organizations, they develop similar formal structures (a process called “isomorphism”). As a consequence of balancing external demands with internal technical requirements, there are routinely gaps between formal structures and daily practices (a process called “decoupling”). A second seminal paper outlined how institutional isomorphism occurred through coercive (including cultural norms and resource dependency), normative (mainly professional influences), and mimetic (copying in the face of uncertainty) channels (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

As an example of this research applied to global education, a seminal contribution of early scholarship was to show that schooling expands beyond what can be accounted for by the needs of industrialization and across countries with hugely diverse economic, political, and social arrangements (Ramirez and Boli 1987; Boli, Ramirez and Meyer 1985; Meyer, Ramirez and Soysal 1992).<sup>iv</sup> A number of neoinstitutional studies emphasize the global expansion of schooling (for a review see Ramirez and Meyer 1980) and isomorphism in formal structures such as the creation of ministries of education, curricula, and policies (Frank, Schofer and Torres 1994; Frank et al. 2000; McEneaney and Meyer 2000; McNeely 1995; Wong 1991). In this body of work, educational systems are a manifestation of universalistic cultural principles of progress and justice that grew out of Western roots to become cornerstones in a world society (Meyer et al. 1997).<sup>v</sup> It is expected that there is a gap between the formal policies espoused in these documents and actual educational access and quality (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

## *New Directions*

These core neoinstitutional concepts of isomorphism and decoupling continue to offer great purchase for understanding phenomena that are weakly explained by rational action arguments rooted in efficiency or power. But at least since the 1990s, these early emphases on top-down processes, structural similarities, and decoupling between policies and practices have been augmented by new insights.

To begin, institutional theorists have grown increasingly sophisticated in their conceptualization of actors and agency. Early studies were criticized for depicting individuals as “cultural dopes” that unthinkingly enacted social scripts. Contemporary scholars reject this characterization, emphasizing that agency is socially constrained and socially constituted (see Westphal & Zajac 2013 for a review). The numbers and types of social actors exercising agency on various fronts has increased dramatically over time (Drori, Meyer & Hwang 2006). The essence of these new social structures has been described as ‘actorhood’, where actors are entities that carry rights and responsibilities on an array of dimensions and seek to act in purposive, legitimate ways (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). Meyer & Bromley (2013) provide an explanation for this trend. Three broad and interconnected cultural trends are most important; the rise of human rights, the decline of the nation-state, and the expansion of scientific thought. Issues of rights, justice, and equality expand dramatically (Lauren 2003; Stacy 2009), undermining traditional notions of authority such as the divine right of kings and absolute sovereignty (Bendix 1980). And medieval religious polities are transformed into the secular, administrative, and legal structures of modern-nation states (Tilly 1990). Evolving in parallel, Enlightenment era philosophy expanded alternative bases of authority rooted in secular individualism and scientific thinking; it is difficult to overstate the authority of scientific principles in contemporary world society (Drori et al. 2006). This process, called cultural rationalization, involves the efforts of hugely empowered individuals to define the natural and social world in terms of linear causal chains, where means and ends, inputs and outputs, or causes and effects, are explicitly specified (sometimes in theory more than in fact).<sup>vi</sup> Overall, traditional forms of authority decline and new actors become endowed with many rights and capacities.

An additional core change in institutional theories of organization is in the expansion of thinking related to contradictions and pluralism generated by institutional pressures. As expanding arenas of the natural and social world are re-imagined as subject to human abilities to understand and control, the external environment becomes increasingly complex and any given entity is subject to an expanding array of rationalized pressures (Meyer and Bromley 2013). Due to the expansion of rational human initiative into new realms, the external environment is altered and it becomes possible and necessary for individuals and organizations to attend to increasingly diverse concerns within the same formal structure. Thus, businesses appear more like responsible citizens, nonprofits and government agencies attend to issues of evaluation and accountability (Bromley and Meyer forthcoming). Within literature on public and nonprofit organizations, the trend is toward discussing ‘blurring’ between sectoral boundaries, as well as ‘hybrids’ and ‘social enterprises’ (Billis 2010; Pache and Santos 2010b). In organizational research this phenomenon is evident in the burgeoning literature using terms like ‘multiple’ or ‘conflicting’ ‘institutional logics’ and ‘institutional pluralism’ (Friedland and Alford 1991; Greenwood et al. 2011; Kraatz and Block 2008; Pache and Santos 2010a; Thornton et al. 2012).

Linked to emphases on contradictions and inconsistencies, some speculate that an alternative form of decoupling, between means and ends, may become increasingly common as scientized activities such as evaluation and monitoring increase on all sorts of dimensions, pushing new concerns into existing social structures and pressing for greater alignment between policy and practice (Bromley and Powell 2012). A central focus of early institutional research was in explaining why adopted policies might not be implemented. In public administration and policy, the issue of implementation failures continues to be a core concern (O'Toole 2000; for a classic case see Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). By neoinstitutional arguments, the gap between policy and practice was expected to be largest when formal external evaluation, inspection, and monitoring were weak or conducted informally (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 356-357). But in the contemporary, highly rationalized environment activities such as formal evaluation are increasingly common, suggesting that this decoupling between formal structures and actual practices may become temporary or less common (Haack et al. 2012).

However, organizations, in theory conceived of as structures designed to efficiently achieve some end goal, in practice come to take on a multitude of additional goals and become more elaborate than pure function demands (Greenwood et al. 2011). Cultural rationalization generates high levels of scientized monitoring and evaluation, pressing organizations to implement (at least in part) the new elements they adopt. It also generates increasing domains that require an organizational response. Whereas early studies of decoupling mainly focused on settings in which formal policies were not implemented, means-ends decoupling describes situations where policies and practices may be quite closely aligned but are opaquely related to an organization's key goal. Under conditions of cultural rationalization, idealized expectations of human capacities and rights expand beyond actual abilities for measurement and control, regardless of how extensive the monitoring. So, for example, even if a foundation's 'theory of change' is thoroughly monitored and evaluated and implemented, the theory itself is often built on a rather uncertain knowledge base and may not lead to stated goals.

A main point is that the rationalization of culture generates increasingly complex entities. This has implications for neoinstitutional understandings of isomorphism. At the macro level organizations or countries may become more similar in that a particular structure or practice may diffuse over time. For example, more countries may adopt education ministries. But the menu of structures available in the environment is also expanding, leading to an exponential increase in the possible combinatorial patterns. Thus, when looking holistically at any two given units they can diverge over time in terms of the set of structures and practices they adopt, even while the macro-level pattern for a practice is one of diffusion. In short, in contemporary neoinstitutional studies the central observation is increasing complexity and elaboration of social structures, driven by the social construction of human ability for agentic behavior on a growing number of fronts. Overall, contemporary organizational institutionalism focuses on the social construction of actors and agency rather than thinking solely in terms of top-down pressures, and gives attention to how institutional pressures can generate complexity and pluralism as well as similarities.

### **Understanding Trends in Global Education Policy and Administration**

Recent developments in institutional theory bridge the fields of organizational sociology and public administration or management, and can provide greater purchase on understanding global

policy and administration in education. The scope and scale of the global education sector is now so large that it touches most, if not all, people alive today by virtue of their inclusion/exclusion and the quality of schooling they receive. As mentioned earlier, initial neoinstitutional insights are valuable for explaining the global expansion of education. But it is not simply the case that education systems have expanded. They have also changed remarkably in terms of who provides services and how they are governed.

Core trends in contemporary global educational policy and administration are privatization and a shift from bureaucratic, hierarchical government authority to post-bureaucratic, diffuse, shared-power forms of governance. Using examples from Latin America, the USA, India, Africa, South-East Asia and England, Ball (2012, 11) explains:

Arguably, the two main axes of global trends in education policy are those of parental choice and the role of 'private' schooling, and the reform of state education systems along managerialist/entrepreneurial lines. The first rests on a set of neo-liberal arguments about more or less radical destatisation, subjecting state organizations to competition and/or the handing over of education service delivery to the private sector. The second is more post-neo-liberal in the sense of reasserting the role of the state but in a new form and with new modalities involving a shift from government to governance; that is from bureaucracy to networks; from delivery to contracting.

Educational expansion amplifies the consequences of policy and administrative shifts that have gained credence especially since the 1990s; namely, privatization and the decentralization of state authority over social service provision. These contemporary global trends in education policy and administration can be accounted for by recent neoinstitutional emphases on the social construction of actors and growing environmental complexity.

### *The Rise of New Actors & Interests*

Globally, the welfare state has not disappeared, but its growth has slowed with the diffusion of public-sector downsizing rhetoric (Lee and Strang 2006). It is commonly observed that neoliberalism, and attendant terms such as "New Public Management," "post-bureaucratic," and "reinventing government", indicate a reconstitution of ideas of sovereignty and territoriality, fundamentally altering the historical relationships between public and private, local and global (Christensen and Lægveid 2001; Kernaghan 2000; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Ong 2006). These neoliberal fashions in education reform and public sector governance are part of a broader movement that has been called the 'denationalization' of the state (Jessop 2004; Sassen 2006). As recent neoinstitutional theory explains, the decline of traditional forms of authority, combined with the expansion of individual rights and capacities, provide a cultural foundation for the construction of new actors (Meyer and Bromley 2013). These new actors are built around principles of expanded human rights and scientific thinking rather than older structures, which more often reflected tradition or charisma. Private organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, have emerged as key service providers and policy influentials in the education arena.

The rise of private, for-profit organizations is often widely noted, although it is difficult to obtain reasonable estimates of the scope or scale of business influence and activities in education in any country, let alone worldwide. In part, this is because many for-profit educational activities are outside the formal system. For instance, Bray (1999, 2001) describes the expansion of a 'shadow

system' of education in the form of private tutoring in countries around the world. In an extreme case, Korea, he estimates that parents spent 150% of the amount of government investment in education (1999, 9). In the US, there is a large market for test preparation (e.g. to provide training for the exams used for entrance to college and graduate schools) and various other kinds of private educational consultants have emerged (e.g. to provide advice on writing college application letters or any sort of educational decision-making). The numbers of students pursuing higher education in private, for-profit organizations is on the rise. As an example, in the US, enrollment at for-profit institutions has increased roughly 225 percent since 1990, and in the 2010-2011 academic year these institutions comprised 12 percent of all postsecondary enrollments, about 2.4 million students (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013). These numbers may wane in light of mounting evidence of the relative failure of these for-profit institutions to help students graduate (Blumenstyk 2012), but there is no sign of their disappearance.

Evidence of the rising prevalence of civil society actors in education is somewhat more available. Education has become a main concern for non-governmental organizations around the world. In a study of 36 countries, education represents the largest part of domestic nonprofit sectors, as shown in figure 1. In the US, education nonprofits have made up twelve to thirteen percent of all registered voluntary associations each year over the period 1995 to 2012 (National Center for Charitable Statistics 2012). Often, these nonprofits work as service providers, existing in partnership with the state through contracting arrangements. At the global level, 238 of the 382 (62 percent) non-governmental organizations with official consultative status with the United Nations are part of the education sector program sector, while 172 (45 percent) identify themselves by the keywords "education" or "schooling", and 45 (12 percent) have the word "education" or its translation in their name (Unesco Website 2013).

Figure 1. Civil society full-time equivalent workforce by field, 36 countries, 1995-2000

An important, but often overlooked, feature of contemporary schooling is that as the range of actors socially authorized to influence schooling expands and scientific knowledge reconstitutes new domains, the sorts of concerns schools must attend to expand as well. In a study of international non-governmental organizations working in the field of educational development, Bromley (2010) documents that in addition to continuing their original work as service providers they increasingly work on scientized activities such as monitoring, evaluation and research. This point is very much in line with contemporary neoinstitutional thought, which points out that as cultural rationalization proceeds the social milieu becomes thick with empowered actors in all sorts of domains. New concerns are pushed and pulled into existing organizations, making them more complex. For example, in many countries around the world curricula increasingly includes emphases on human rights, environmentalism, and diversity, in addition to traditional topics such as national history (Meyer et al 2010; Bromley et al 2011; Bromley 2014). Schools today not only socialize citizens, provide job training, and contribute to equal opportunity, increasingly they also attend to issues of student and teacher safety, consider nutritional needs of their students, and perhaps have initiatives related to protecting the natural world. They must do this while improving test scores on a growing array of assessments, and while reporting (often formally) to governments, communities, donors and other stakeholders.

## *The Rise of Managerial Governance*

Overall, education has expanded, while government authority over schooling has weakened and private organizations and individuals have become more legitimate voices in school provision and regulation. In the neoinstitutional view, new governance mechanisms, such as emphases on accountability and transparency through monitoring, standards, and reporting, emerge to protect rights of a growing number of groups and on a growing number of topics in a systematic and objective (i.e. scientific) way. These new forms of governance underpinned by principles of science and rights in part replace former emphases on hierarchical and imperative authority or absolute loyalty to a sovereign (Drori et al. 2006). Older social structures, which were imagined to serve the interests of a principal, now become populated with sovereign and sacred individuals, all of whom have rights and capacities to be respected (Elliott 2007). Schools are no longer envisioned as distinct social structures; instead they become instances of organization where general principles of rights and scientific management should be applied (Bromley & Meyer, forthcoming). Several oft-observed trends result:

First, with the expansion of social scientific thinking, it becomes assumed we can measure learning through test scores that are comparable across country settings and over time, and that factors influencing test scores (e.g. principal leadership, teacher quality, hours of schooling, socioeconomic status) in one setting may influence it in another. To wit, cross-national educational assessment is becoming a global phenomenon; while only 43 economies participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, the number increased to 65 by 2012, and 71 are signed up to participate in 2015 (PISA Website 2014).

Second, the legitimation of quantitative test scores as an outcome of schooling combined with the creation of economics as a scientific field created a setting ripe for the application of market-based theories of incentives, competition, choice, and efficiency/effectiveness. Framed as science rather than ideology, issues of parental choice, vouchers, privatization, accountability, evaluation, and the like are now central educational concerns in countries all over the world, and much policy research (also sometimes described as the economics of education) analyzes the effectiveness of these reforms worldwide (e.g. see Akabayashi and Arakia 2011 for vouchers in Japan; Angrist, Bettinger and Kremer 2006 for vouchers in Colombia; Barrera-Osorio and Raju 2011 for private school subsidies in Pakistan; Böhlmark and Lindahl 2008 for vouchers in Sweden; Bravo et al. 2010 for vouchers in Chile; Himmler 2007 for school choice in the Netherlands). By cultural fiat, the best way to improve schooling is using scientific approaches and economics provided a framework for doing so.

Third, beyond the evolution of economics, the general rise of management as a scientific endeavor has contributed to an additional set of new influences that provide schools with abstract strategies for improving efficiency and effectiveness (in theory if not in practice). Principals and administrators become leaders and managers, sometimes trained in collaboration with business schools.<sup>vii</sup> An extreme example is found in a data collection effort known as the World Management Survey, where scholars created context-free definitions of proper management that applied across countries (developed and developing), sectors (education, health care, retail, manufacturing), and ownership type (public or private) (World Management Survey Website 2013; for a detailed methodology see Bloom and Van Reenen 2007). Using this data to study the



effect of management on school achievement in Canada, Italy, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US, one study describes how “measuring management requires a definition of “good” and “bad” managerial practices which is possibly not contingent on the specific production environment (firms, hospitals, schools) and applicable to different units” (Di Liberto, Schivardi and Sulis 2013, 7).<sup>viii</sup> It finds better management is linked to higher test scores, but notes few differences between public versus private schools. Another study examines whether education, manufacturing, retail, or health care have better or worse managerial practices across countries, as shown in figure 2. The authors find that government ownership is associated with worse management practices and poor use of incentives in hiring, firing, promotion practices, and that the US outperforms other countries in terms of scores in retail and hospital management (Bloom et al. 2012, 20). The core point is to illustrate a growing body of research focusing on efficiency and effectiveness in education, where these are thought of as outcomes that can be measured and managed using economic notions of employee incentives and school competition.

Figure 2. Management Scores across Countries and Sectors

Fourth, the decline of traditional forms of authority and expansions in science and rights create space for new actors to become involved in educational governance. A nascent body of literature also points to the growth of advocacy activities in education. Path-breaking research on the rise of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) notes they may bring the potential to democratize global educational governance. As Murphy and Mundy (2001) describe, TANs are a new and qualitatively different wave of transnational regulation, in that NGOs, citizens associations, trade unions, and others, come together to influence nation-states. These efforts are most recognizable in the genesis of the Global Campaign for Education and the Education for All movement. Parallel to the rise of TANs, it is plausible that domestic advocacy and lobbying by both nonprofit and for-profit education consortiums have become a powerful influence on governments, although relatively little research has been done on the topic.<sup>ix</sup> One government watchdog group, the Center for Responsive Politics, has tracked spending on education lobbying in the US over time, as shown in figure 3. At its peak, spending exceeded 100 million dollars annually. Interestingly, in the 1990s the top spenders were well-known universities, such as Columbia, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins. But by 2013, for-profit corporations such as Warburg Pincus (a private equity firm that is the largest shareholder of Bridgepoint Education) and the Apollo Group (owner of the University of Phoenix) were among the largest spenders on education lobbying (Center for Responsive Politics Website 2013). In the US, the vast resources that lobbyists and huge private foundations (such as the Gates Foundation) spend do seem to have a significant influence on education policy (Reckhow 2013).<sup>x</sup>

Figure 3. Size of Education Lobbying in the US, 1998-2012

Many describe the new forms of authority and governance as a network rather than a hierarchy (Ball 2012; O’Toole 2000; Provan and Kenis 2008). In his study of cross-national policy networks in education, Ball eloquently discusses the “increasing role of business, social enterprise and philanthropy in education service delivery and education policy, and the concomitant emergence of new forms of ‘network’ governance...[and] the advocacy and dissemination of ‘private’ and social enterprise solutions to the ‘problems’ of state education (Ball 2012,1). The imagery of authority and governance structures as becoming more like networks is central in both New Public Management discussions (emphasizing principal-agent

interactions) and a discourse of New Public Governance (emphasizing more collaborative and stewardship-like relations among actors).

But in existing accounts of New Public Management trends and New Public Governance, there is little explanation for *why* these changes to traditional governments are occurring. The present social and cultural context is taken as a given, with little attempt to account for why we might see the rise of new types of stakeholders or the development of a plural/pluralistic world (e.g. Osborne 2010). Neoinstitutional theory provides an explanation for the emergence of network governance and new stakeholders as rooted in cultural shifts, especially expansion of individual rights and capacities (for who needs to be addressed) and science (for how to address problems). The rise of science and rights along with the decline of the state have flattened older authority structures and led to the inclusion of new actors, creating what some have described as a ‘multi-stakeholder’ and ‘shared power’ world (Crosby and Bryson 2005).

Two additional points are important. First, network imagery only captures part of the picture, as the underlying cultural basis of authority stems from principles of individual rights and scientific thinking that have influence beyond any particular pattern of relations. Descriptively, it makes sense to discuss mechanisms of ‘governance’ rather than the traditional authority of ‘government’ (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992). But forms of rationalized governance, which include mechanisms like formal evaluations, ratings, rankings, certifications, standards, and accreditations, certainly involve multiple players (e.g. nonprofits, government, and businesses). But the source of their legitimacy is rooted in an underlying perception of scientific objectivity and/or promotion of human rights. Based in these universalistic principles, the influence of rationalized governance mechanisms can extend even to units outside their formal scope of inclusion or to persons and actors with whom there is no direct network contact.

Second, the rise of rationalized interests in an array of domains (e.g. student and parent rights, safety, environmentalism, privacy, health) press education organizations to respond in substantial ways on multiple fronts. The ceremonial adoption of policies or structures becomes less feasible in a rationalized cultural environment. Outside stakeholders press for evidence of accountability, and internal participants often themselves prefer to align policies and practices. For example, in a recent study of US schools, Rowan (2006) points out that the context for schooling has become highly rationalized. He points to the rise of large testing agencies, increasing credentialing for education professionals, and stronger policy instruments designed to support particular curricular reforms and hold teachers and schools accountable for student performance. Rowan concludes “institutional governance...can, in fact, result in more than ceremonial conformity and loose coupling, even in regulated organizations such as schools” (2006, 24). Others have similarly noted how the heightened salience of external accountability measures has resulted in accounts of the recoupling of school practices to formal policies (Spillane et al. 2011). Related, a recent study of the use of strategic planning in nonprofits concludes that many plans are faithfully implemented by staff although their utility is unknown, creating a situation better described as “symbolic implementation” than “symbolic adoption” (Bromley et al. 2012). Along these lines, Mundy and Menashy (2014) highlight the inconsistency in the World Bank’s simultaneous pursuits of economic returns on loans and poverty alleviation. The means and ends of schooling are continually decoupled and recoupled as waves of reform redefine both the goals of education and how to achieve these goals.

## Discussion & Conclusion

Neoinstitutional studies of the 1970s and 1980s were largely characterized by emphases on isomorphism and decoupling between policies and practices. Recent advancements emphasize the social construction of great numbers of new actors constituted by principles of rights and science, and an attendant complication of the external environment surrounding those actors. These new directions in institutional theory have mainly developed in the study of organizations, but they apply equally to dominant trends in global educational policy and administration; namely, the rise of new actors in service provision and governance and the increasingly complex structure of schooling. Due to cultural rationalization, layers of administration and management are increasing on multiple fronts. But this is no simple expansion of hierarchical bureaucracy designed to transmit the will of a centralized sovereign down to lower levels of society. Instead organizational expansion in education is the result of increasing authority, empowerment, and rationalization of actors in multiple domains.

As a general comment, all of the perspectives discussed (power/politics-based, managerial/economics-based, and cultural/institutional-based) are huge categories of thought with much internal variation. At the margins, there is often overlap between them. For instance, in more Foucaultian formulations, a power-based view considers “expertise” a sort of influence, and imagines that experts are socialized into their profession and follow its tenets independent of their own self-interest. This is quite similar to many neoinstitutional ideas of influence. In the words of Sahlin and Wedlin, “it appears to be not so much a case of ideas flowing widely because they are powerful, but rather of ideas becoming powerful as they circulate” (2008, 223). Moreover, these lenses are not always mutually exclusive. At times, an institutional lens complements, rather than competes with functional views of global education policy and administration.

Neoinstitutional theory, however, generates different sorts of research questions and provides explanatory purchase in the wide swathes of social life where explanations of self-interest or efficiency are weak. For example, in critical conceptions new forms of governance are depicted as reflecting the interests of international organizations, wealthy core countries, and transnational elites, who use educational policy to gain wealth and/or power (Altbach 1977; Arnove 1980). It remains uncertain, however, whether transnational advocacy by global civil society groups serves as a counterbalance to hegemonic forces or yet another vehicle for consolidating power (Murphy and Mundy 2001). Parallel to the ambivalence among comparative education researchers about the democratizing effects of TANs, those looking at the US are unsure whether the growing influence of private actors serve as a counterbalance to government or represent a new form of oppression (Tompkins-Stange 2013).

A common challenge of power-based explanations is that it can be very unclear whose interests are being served in what way, and conflicting predictions emerge (e.g. regarding whether international NGOs are a democratizing force in education or serve to reproduce existing power structures). These views often ignore the public good motives of many individuals and organizations working in the field of education, implicitly assuming the interests of educational experts stem from rather narrow views of personal or national gain. Furthermore, while raw power and interests certainly matter at times, recent trends likely have a taming influence on older forms of authority because it is no longer a legitimate basis for action. In more nuanced

applications, critical research notes that the arbitrary, raw execution of power by individual elites or the state is increasingly difficult to justify as authority becomes distributed among multiple types of actors and individuals. For example, in a study of global literacy policy and Unesco, Jones (1988) describes how use the raw coercive force of aid or sanctions is rare, indicating that contemporary hegemony more commonly work through external experts that shape policy and administrative formulations in weaker states. Others similarly note the power of global educational policy networks, which stem from core countries and international organizations like Unesco and the World Bank, and act to limit the autonomy of less powerful countries to shape their educational priorities (Ball 2012; Mundy 1998; Jones 1988, 1992). While education experts certainly have influence, they often seem to spread dominant principles as a cultural matter more than in clear pursuit of their own interests in terms of accumulating power or money.

Alternatively, from an economic view, changes in policy and administration are assumed to occur because other actors can provide education more effectively and efficiently than the state (Friedman 1955; Hoxby 2003; Neal 2002). A recent World Bank-sponsored study, for instance, describes the benefits of private provision of schooling as competition in the market for education, autonomy in school management, improved standards through contracts, [and] risk-sharing between government and providers. The study claims:

Engagement of the private sector is often promoted as an innovative means of improving school quality. It is argued that competition for students will lead to efficiency gains, as schools – state and private – compete for students and try to improve quality while reducing cost). The idea is that, when private schools are encouraged to attract students who otherwise would be educated in state schools, they become innovative and thereby bring improvement to the learning process. Likewise, state schools, to attract students and the resources that come with them, seek to improve and provide an education at least as good as the private schools. Thus, it is argued that school choice will lead to improved learning outcomes and increased efficiency in both types of schools (Lewis and Patrinos 2012, 6).

In this economic approach, the ideological underpinnings of educational reforms are hidden. Policies are depicted as instrumentally rational, apolitical, and acultural. That is, the starting point is to examine the effects of neoliberal policies based on the assumption that they spread because they are effective, rather than examining political and cultural reasons such policies exist. Managerial approaches, such as those of the World Management Survey described in the previous section, share this assumption. Social structures are assumed to be functional and their appropriate design optimizes performance, which is routinely linked to finding the proper incentives to motivate managers and employees to be productive. These assumptions are, rightly or wrongly, generalized to any type of organization.

There is evidence, however, that the assumption of functionality may be misplaced in educational policy and administration. It is increasingly difficult to support arguments that the policies associated with neoliberalism generate across-the-board improved educational outcomes, as indicated by poor outcomes in settings where these policies are most extreme (e.g. for-profit universities in the US). Diane Ravitch, once an advocate of such reforms, describes how her views have changed on the use of accountability, choice, and market-based solutions for improving education: “standardized testing, vouchers, charter-schools, and the No Child Left

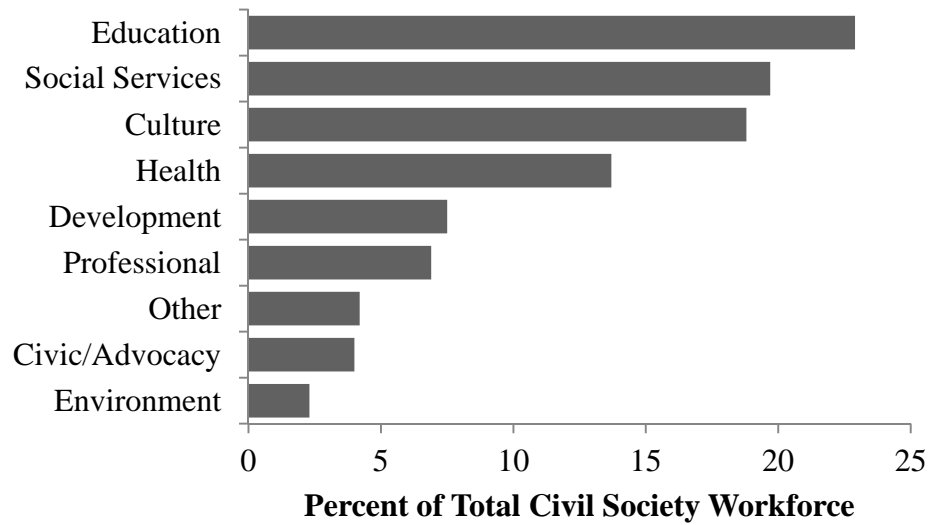
Behind Act have not delivered on their promises. In fact, many of the reforms have had little or no effect. And in many cases, the reforms have backfired” (2011, 2). Similarly, in an extensive review of empirical research of market mechanisms in education commissioned by the OECD, Waslander et al. (2010) find little supporting evidence.

Given its utility in explaining arational characteristics of contemporary governance, it is somewhat odd that sociological neoinstitutionalism has not made inroads into mainstream studies of public administration and policy.<sup>xi</sup> In part, this stems from a disciplinary split between management and public administration. Critically, Kelman observes this disciplinary divide means public administration scholars are “fixating on the unique “public” part of public organizations and neglecting, even proudly, the “organization” part connecting the field to a larger world. Thus, the central separatist theme is opposition to what is designated as “generic management”—the view that organizations share enough common features about which generalizations may be made to make it useful to study agencies and firms together” (Kelman 2007, 233).

As a matter of history, explanatory emphases on power and function in public policy and administration make sense. But as a matter of modern theory and practice, this two-part focus overlooks at least sixty years of insights from social and organizational theory, limiting the evolution of policy and administration to develop constructivist insights into public phenomenon. At a minimum, the classic twofold characterization of administration/policy-as-politics and administration/policy-as-function should be made threefold to include a view of policy and administration as culture.

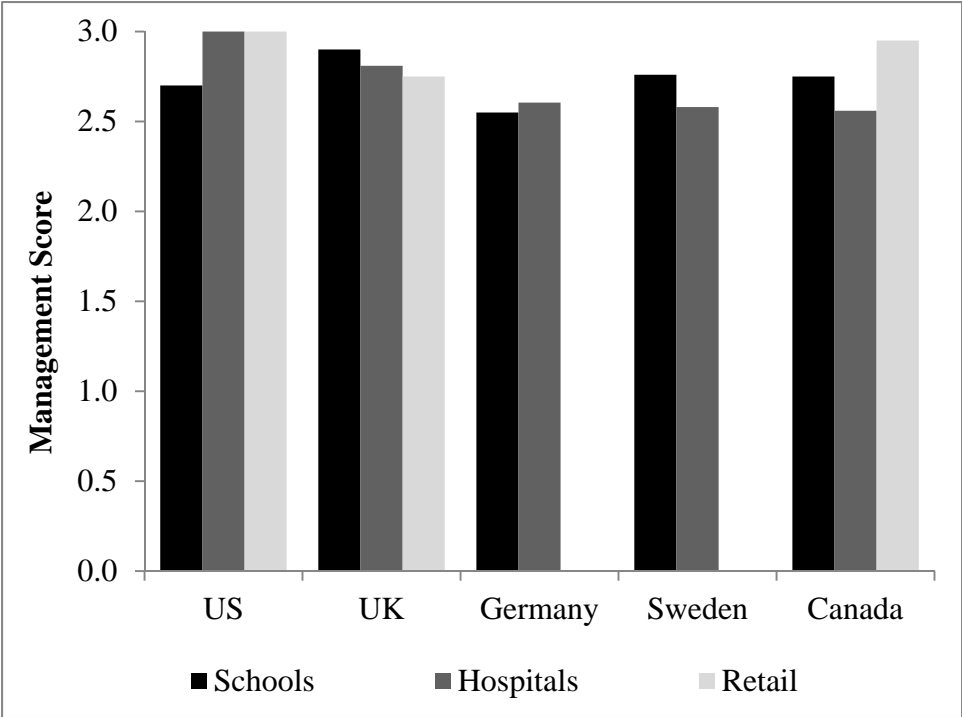
## Figures

**Figure 1. Civil society full-time equivalent workforce by field across 36 countries, 1995-2000**



Source: Adapted from Salamon and Sokolowski 2004.

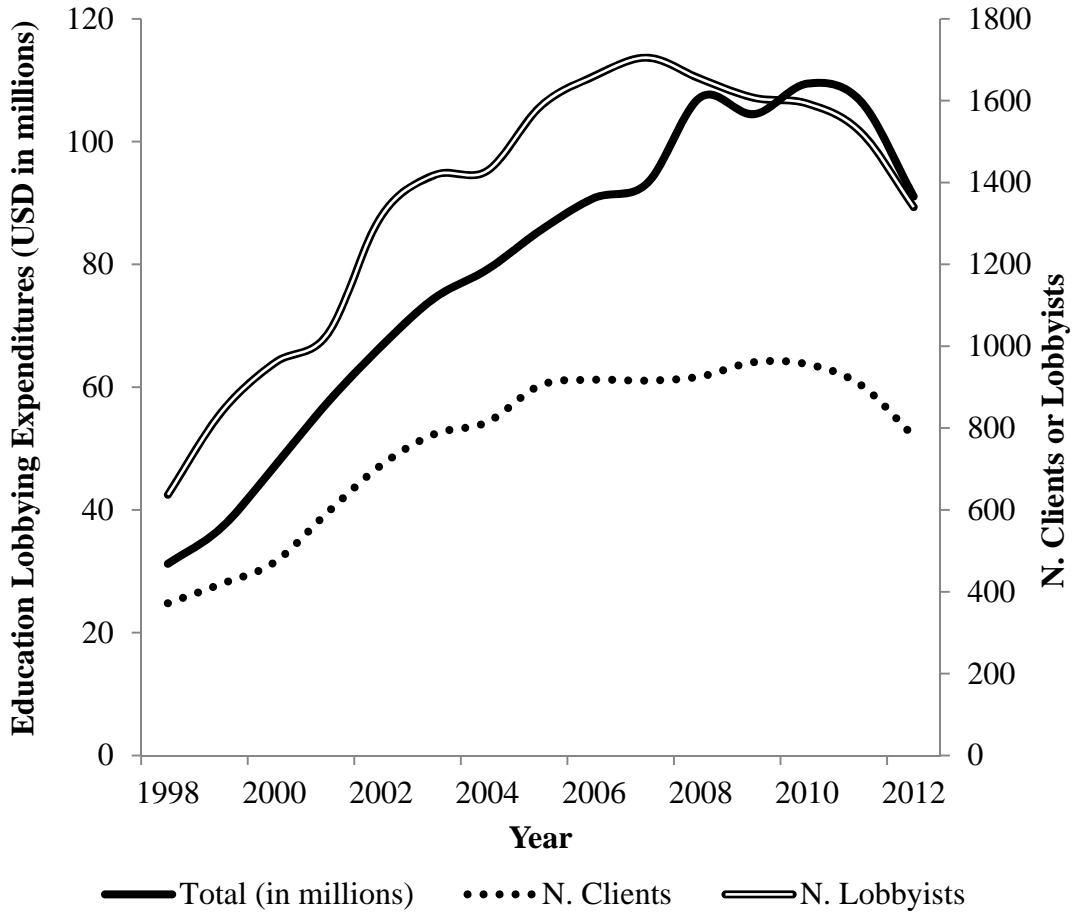
**Figure 2. Management Scores across Countries and Sectors**



Note: Averages taken across all organizations within each country. 1,183 hospitals, 780 schools, and 661 retail sites.

Source: Estimates adapted from Bloom et al. 2012: 20.

**Figure 3. Size of Education Lobbying in the US, 1998-2012**



Source: Center for Responsive Politics 2012



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Patricia Bromley currently works at the University of Utah as an Assistant Professor of Public Administration. She received her PhD in international and comparative education from Stanford University. Conceptually, her research focuses on the rise and globalization of a culture emphasizing rational, scientific thinking and expansive forms of rights. Empirically, she draws on two settings - education systems and organizations - to show how the institutionalization of these new cultural emphases transforms societies worldwide. Recent publications appear in *Administration & Society*, *Sociological Theory*, and the *American Sociological Review*.

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<sup>i</sup> For the purposes of this chapter policy and administration are treated synonymously. Historically, they have been thought of as distinct, even dichotomous, phenomena (see, e.g. Goodnow 1914; Wilson 1887). Policy was the realm of elected officials and politics, while administration and effective policy implementation was the domain of unelected career bureaucrats. Especially since World War II, however, the interconnections between policy and administration have been widely noted (e.g. Denhardt 1990; Gaus 1950). Unelected officials have expertise and influence that is sought after in policy formulation and their decisions on how to interpret, implement, and apply policies at the 'street-level' are far from apolitical (Lipskey 1980). Moreover, the major trends discussed here, linked to educational expansion and neoliberalism, influence policy and administration alike.

<sup>ii</sup> Roughly forty percent of submissions to the Organization and Management Theory section of the Academy of Management's 2012 annual meeting were on the topic of institutional theory, and over half of reviewers self-identified as having relevant expertise (Academy of Management 2013). The two most cited papers in the *Administrative Science Quarterly* are two canonical neo-institutional theory pieces (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977) and these two articles are also among top four most-cited works in both the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*, as reported by Caren 2012 at <http://nealcaren.web.unc.edu/the-most-cited-articles-in-sociology-by-journal/> (Accessed on March 21, 2013).

<sup>iii</sup> Although it is not the focus here, a rich tradition of neoinstitutional research also focuses on causality in the opposite direction with an eye to understanding how individuals construct and alter institutions (DiMaggio 1988; Zucker 1988). For instance, Hallett (2010) emphasized the individual-level turmoil and conflict involved in a recoupling process in schools. Over time, causality can run in both directions (Padgett and Powell 2012).



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<sup>iv</sup> When applied to the global level, neoinstitutional theory is often called world polity or world society theory (Meyer et al 1997).

<sup>v</sup> Contrasting functionalist arguments suggest that schooling grows because industrializing economies need workers with more specific differentiated skills (Trow 1961; Clark 1962). Alternatively, others emphasize the role of schooling in facilitating class and status competition (Collins 1979) or the maintenance of elite hegemony in society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carnoy 1982). Such arguments are hard-pressed to explain trends toward structural similarity worldwide and the prevalence of decoupling between formal policies and daily practices.

<sup>vi</sup> Rationalization is defined as “the cultural accounting of society and its environments in terms of articulated, unified, integrated, universalized, and causally and logically structured schemes” (Meyer and Jepperson 2000: 102). This definition builds on Weber’s ideas of instrumental rationality as the restructuring of social entities around clear rules and toward explicit purposes (1968).

<sup>vii</sup> Stanford University, for example, offers a joint Master of Arts in Education/Master of Business Administration degree.

<sup>viii</sup> The full questionnaire (accessed on November 25, 2013) is available at:

[http://worldmanagementsurvey.org/wp-content/images/2011/01/Education\\_Survey\\_Instrument\\_20110110.pdf](http://worldmanagementsurvey.org/wp-content/images/2011/01/Education_Survey_Instrument_20110110.pdf).

It comprises five sections. (1) Operations: concerned with the standardization of instructional processes, personalization of teaching and adoption of best practices within the school). (2) Monitoring: focuses on the monitoring of performance and reviewing the results, the dialogue between components within the school and the consequences of anomalies in the processes. (3) Targets: assessment of the managerial capacity of school principals to identify quantitative and qualitative targets, their interconnection and their temporal cascade. (4) People: concerned with human resource management, ranging from promoting and rewarding employees based on performance, removing poor performers, hiring best teachers, and trying to keep the best ones. (5) Leadership: the leadership capacity of the principal jointly with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities within the school.

<sup>ix</sup> For an exception in transnational education advocacy, see Verger and Novelli 2012. Outside the realm of education, in a study of nonprofits in Kenya Brass (2012) shows changes in both policy and administration as the government service provision agencies hire former nonprofit staff, are influenced by nonprofit lobbying, and mimic nonprofit service provision strategies.

<sup>x</sup> I focus mainly on primary and secondary schooling, but parallel trends are found in higher education through the rise of rankings, models of competition between and within universities, and increasing layers of administration to deal with things like safety, health, protecting the natural world, student rights, and so on.

<sup>xi</sup> This characterization applies far more scholarship in North America than elsewhere. In Europe there is a vibrant strand of ‘Scandinavian institutionalism’ that has many parallels to sociological neoinstitutionalism and is widely known in European studies of public administration. This body of work builds on insights of March and collaborators such as Olsen, Cohen and Christiansen, documenting that public organizations are often far from rational (e.g. March and Olsen 1984). More recent formulations emphasize the ‘translation’ and ‘editing’ of external models into organizational settings (e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008) and the reformulation of organizations as ‘actors’ (e.g. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000).