Comparative Policy Studies: Theories, Methods, and Emerging Issues

Lecturer: Professor Gita Steiner-Khamsi
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, USA

Main disciplines: Educational Science, Sociology, Research Methodology

Dates: 25 – 29 July 2016
Course Credits: 10 pts (ECTS)
Limitation: 25 participants

Objectives
The seminar guides doctoral students in their endeavor to review, apply, and critically reflect on relevant theories and methods that lend themselves for understanding the policy process from an international comparative perspective. A special focus will be placed on the comparative study of global education policies, in particular, on the reception and translation of such “traveling reforms,” the role of international comparison for global norm setting, and the growing influence of multinational businesses and philanthropies in shaping educational reform. Even though the examples deal mostly with education policies (and in a few cases health policies), some of the theories, methods and emerging issues, discussed in the seminar, may be useful for public policy studies in general.

The seminar is divided into three parts:

Part 1 presents core concepts of three influential strands of social theory and shows how the same phenomenon may be interpreted differently, depending on which theoretical framework one has chosen. Three grand social theories (critical social theory, neo-institutionalism, system theory) and several interpretive frameworks for analyzing the policy process (Advocacy Coalition Framework, Garbage Can Model, Theory of the Post-Bureaucratic State) are presented in depth in order to explore the four most common frames used in policy studies: economic frame, political frame, rational frame, and social frame.
**Part 2** focuses on methods of comparative inquiry that are especially suited for comparative policy studies. The first methodology session focuses on indicator research and on cross-national comparison. The second session deals with studies that draw on relational data to identify types of policy actors (e.g., policy brokers, policy entrepreneurs, policy translators) and policy networks.

**Part 3** highlights five new developments or emerging issues that are currently being heatedly debated in the policy research community: (i) the politics of transnational policy borrowing, (ii) governance by numbers and soft governance, (iii) the advance of non-state actors (businesses, philanthropy, non-governmental organizations, supranational organizations) as service providers, traders in commodities, and backstage advisors, (iv) the role of global agendas—most recently the 2030 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), and (v) the rise of new global actors and donors (notably China) in shaping education policy in developing countries.

The syllabus includes a few texts produced by scholars based in Scandinavian countries. The participating doctoral students are encouraged to share additional relevant reading on the course website. There will be optional advisement sessions after the lectures for doctoral students that are interested in feedback on their policy-related dissertation research.

**Key books**
Participants should obtain and read up on these books in advance of the course:

Lecture 1: **Theories I: Governmentality and the Role of the State**

The seminar starts out with a reflection on the changing role of the State in agenda setting, policy formulation, and policy evaluation drawing on Foucault’s concepts of governmentality. In addition to reading key theory texts, the session discusses two examples: (i) “governance by numbers” (Ozga) and (ii) education as “pastoral care” (Popkewitz).

Readings:

Lecture 2: **Theories II: Neo-Institutionalism and the Role of Transnational Regimes**

Arguably, neo-institutionalist theories lend themselves for a reflection on why national systems adopt international knowledge, beliefs and standards and what role international organizations play in propelling such international scripts. The three examples discussed in this session relate to (i) the internationalization of management knowledge, (ii) the global spread of human rights education, and (iii) the Education for All and the Health for All international agreements.

Readings:

Lecture 3: **Theories III: System Theory and the Role of Externalization**

There is an interesting debate in comparative education between authors writing within the interpretive framework of neo-institutionalism and those with an affinity to system theory. The main tenets of the controversy will be discussed. Key concepts of system theory, such as functional differentiation, exclusion/inclusion, and self-referentiality will be explored and subsequently applied to shed light on two issues: (i) public-private partnerships in education and (ii) the use of “scientific rationality” (Luhmann) in the policy process.

Readings:

Lecture 4: **Theories IV: Interpretive Frameworks for Understanding the Policy Process**

The fourth and last theory session comprises a wide array of influential theories commonly referenced in public policy studies, notably the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the Garbage Can Model, and the Theory of the Post-bureaucratic State. In an attempt to explore under-studied aspects of the policy process, the lecturer presents her own classification of theoretical concepts taking into account transnational networks and global actors.

Readings:


Lecture 5: **Methods of Comparative Inquiry I: Analyzing Systems**

The first method session provides an overview of comparative methods of inquiry drawing on Todd Landman’s textbook. Additionally, the texts read in this section explore how international rankings and cross-national comparison, as manifested in OECD- and IEA-type studies, are used as a new policy tool to generate or alleviate, respectively, reform pressure.

Readings:

Lecture 6: **Methods of Comparative Inquiry II: Analyzing Actors, Relations & Networks**

The second methods section discusses the use of social network analysis for understanding the relation between policy actors, in particular, policy brokers, policy entrepreneurs, and policy translators.

Readings:

Lecture 7: **Issues I: Globalization and Education Policy: Part 1**
The third part of the seminar (sessions 7 – 10) addresses current issues in policy studies from an international comparative perspective. Session 7 starts out with introducing current debates, trends and empirical studies in policy borrowing research carried out in different regions, including in Scandinavian countries. A fascinating new trend is to compare the varied receptions of PISA league leaders, such as Finland, and explore the country-specific explanations or rather “projections” (Waldow, Takayama, Sung) into Finnish success.

Two of the questions that will guide this particular session are the following: (1) What do these country-specific projections into Finnish success tell us about controversial policy issues in the recipient country? (2) Under which circumstances and to what extent do references to PISA have a salutary effect on coalition building in the local context?

Readings:

Lecture 8: **Issues II: Globalization and Education Policy: Part 2**
The discussion of global education policy continues into session 8. In this session, we read a wide range of studies, ranging from authors that explore the phenomenon from an anthropological perspective to others who use a political economy framework to explain the impact of globalization on education policy.

Readings:

Lecture 9: Issues III: Businesses and Philanthropy

Arguably, marketization, privatization, and commodification are by no means new phenomena, but they nowadays respond to, and create, new realities resulting in new structures, practices and beliefs. The seminar attempts to explore how the current wave of commercialization is fundamentally different from earlier waves of private sector involvement in education.

In pursuing this research question, we will explore a few topics that emerged in the 2016 title of the World Yearbook of Education entitled *The Global Education Industry* (published by Routledge) such as, for example, (1) the global reach of the education industry and its explosive growth over the past few years for all kinds of educational services and products (provision of schooling, consultancies, textbook development, testing, etc.). (2) the impact of the global education industry on how education is conceptualized, governed, and funded including, for example, the new division of roles between the State and the Market, and (3) the emergence of new markets for the education industry such as, for example, low fee private schools in developing countries.

Readings:

Lecture 10: Issues IV: The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and New Donors; Wrap-Up
The last session investigates the international cooperation models of new global state actors, notably PR China but also other BRIC countries, and reflects on trends in operationalizing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The last section will also be used for a summary and a retrospective of the ten lectures.

Readings:

- Blogs that discuss indicators for measuring SDG targets (to be determined).
Complete reading list (alphabetical)


• Luhmann, Niklas and Schorr, Klaus-Eberhard, Problems of Reflection in the System of Education. Münster: Waxmann (excerpt).


**The lecturer**

[Gita Steiner-Khamsi](#) is Professor of Comparative and International Education at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York. Prior to her appointment at Columbia University (1995), she worked for close to ten years as policy analyst in the Ministry of Education, Canton of Zurich, Switzerland. She published eight books, numerous journal articles and book chapters on areas related to comparative policy studies, globalization, comparative methods, and international educational development.

She has analyzed school reforms and teacher policies in North America, Europe as well as in Mongolia and in Central Asia. She is series editor of two book series in comparative education, one with Routledge (*World Yearbook of Education*) and another with Teachers College Press (*International Perspectives on Educational Reform*), and is a former president of the Comparative and International Education Society (2016).