

# Breaking Tradition: Taking Stock of Research on Global School Choice

Beth Wright  
Loyola University Chicago

*School choice policies, as neoliberal reforms, have often been analyzed using the very discourse embedded in neoliberal mentalities. By reviewing the way scholars have conceptualized school choice as a transnational phenomenon, this paper evaluates the extent to which scholarship has attempted to, or succeeded in, overcoming traditional, neoliberal analyses of school choice. First, the paper attempts to define and problematize neoliberalism and market-based reforms. Then, it describes the various ways in which scholars have conceptualized school choice policies as global. Finally, the paper uses Robertson and Dale's (2008) key assumptions to evaluate the extent to which research on global school choice has broken free from traditional modes of research. By interrogating traditional modes of scholarly inquiry, it becomes possible for scholars in Comparative and International Education to approach better understandings of the way complex global policies play out.*

## Introduction

School choice policies, with roots in neoliberal mentalities, have gained an increasingly prominent voice among policymakers and educational researchers in recent years. Not only are market-based policies gaining popularity, but the ideas and language behind such policies have permeated educational discourse. However, diverse actors across different local contexts interpret and experience neoliberal policies in specific and variegated ways. Even though the policies themselves grow out of a coherent set of neoliberal ideas, they play out in a complex way across the globe.

According to Apple (1999), neoliberal dominance in policy creation across the globe has been critiqued within the academy, but those critiques often utilize the very categories created by neoliberal ideology (p. 16). In the time since Apple's assertion, some scholars in Comparative and International Education (Stambach, 2003; Carney, 2009) have sought alternative ways of conceptualizing school choice as a global reform. It is important to seek new methods and concepts that facilitate an understanding of this neoliberal reform outside the confines of neoliberal language and traditional social-scientific constructs. Doing so would allow for a more complex understanding of the ways in which school choice policies play out and influence various actors across global spaces. This paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which current literature in the field of Comparative Education has fulfilled Apple's (1999) call to analyze a neoliberal policy, school choice, using new methods and categories that reflect the complex nature of globalization.

School choice policies, as neoliberal reforms, have often been analyzed using the very discourse embedded in neoliberal mentalities. By reviewing the way scholars have conceptualized school choice as a transnational phenomenon, this paper evaluates the extent to which scholarship has attempted to, or succeeded in, overcoming traditional, neoliberal analyses of school choice. First, the paper attempts to define and problematize neoliberalism and market-based reforms. Then, it describes the various ways in which scholars have conceptualized school choice policies as

global. Finally, the paper uses Robertson and Dale's (2008) key assumptions to evaluate the extent to which research on global school choice has broken free from traditional modes of research.

### **Neoliberalism and its Discontents**

School choice policies, as market-based reforms, can be characterized as neoliberal reforms. However, neoliberalism has itself become a "rascal concept—promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested" (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2009, p. 184). Beginning with the abstract ideological proposals of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, neoliberalism would initially be enacted under Augusto Pinochet, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan. Reacting against Keynesian economic policies, neoliberals created state policies that would guarantee a smoothly functioning, preeminent market (England & Ward, 2007; Brenner et al., 2009; Dean, 2010).

Even though many see neoliberalism as an economic mentality, it must also be seen as a mentality of governance (Rose, 1999; Dean, 2010). Hindess (2004) argues that the crux of neoliberalism "lies in the attempt to introduce not only market and quasi-market arrangements but also empowerment, self-government and responsibility into areas of social life which had hitherto been organized in other ways" (p. 35). For instance, introducing individual choice into the realm of public education promotes individual responsibility and self-government by forcing actors to choose. Implementing neoliberal reforms creates a system that governs indirectly.

Rather than government-dictated control of citizens, which Hayek warned against, neoliberalism governs through "the calculative choice of formally free actors" (Collier & Ong, 2005). In this way, Rose (1996) and others (see Peters, 2005; Dean, 2010; Suspitsyna, 2010) argue in the tradition of Foucault that power and control exist in mechanisms like choice. Under market systems that empower individuals, self-government and individual entrepreneurship become increasingly important. Individual decisions are dictated not simply through "free choice," but are mediated by the range of choices available, the way in which information about choices is presented, and prevailing notions of what constitutes a "good" choice. While neoliberal policies provide actors with the freedom to choose, individuals have no choice but to choose, and to regulate their actions in accordance with available and desirable choices.

More concretely, Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, and Murillo (2002) argue that neoliberal reforms in education pose problems specifically because they are rooted in economic ideas. Using market ideology to structure public schooling is necessarily based on costs and benefits as understood in economic terms. Neoliberal discourse around schooling not only surrounds policies like school choice, but also narrows the range of education's goals. In order to survive in the educational market, individuals, schools, and policies must rely on measurable statistics. Educational goals that are not readily quantified often get left behind.

Theorists have also noted that neoliberalism is "oft-invoked but ill-defined" (Mudge, 2008), perhaps because conceptualizing neoliberalism as a monolithic governmental state or a global hegemonic force cannot encompass its complexity. Rather than thinking of it as static, England and Ward (2007), as well as Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2009), have focused on neoliberalization. As a process, neoliberalization is variegated, unfinished, and contingent. It is a slippery concept to theorize, let alone study empirically. School choice, as a neoliberal policy, embodies these conceptual challenges.

### **Conceptualizing Transnational School Choice**

Several scholars in the field of Comparative and International Education have studied school choice as a global phenomenon, given the policy's increasing popularity transnationally. Scholars conceptualize globalization in varying and diverse ways, so it is unsurprising that they also present varying interpretations of school choice policies. However, across conceptual and methodological differences, scholars of school choice have collectively issued a warning against placing too much faith in market-based reforms by painting a nuanced picture of the way school choice policies work.

#### *A Symptom of Economic Globalization*

When describing school choice policies, many scholars focus on neoliberalism and, more specifically, on economic globalization. The connection between school choice and global capitalism runs across the literature. Astiz, Wiseman, and Baker (2002) refer to economic globalization as the "intensification of a global market operating across and among a system of national labor markets through international competition" (p. 67). This definition provides a fairly concrete description of economic globalization, describing global capitalism as increased international connection through economic transactions. Davies and Guppy (1997) similarly argue that economic globalization has caused the global marketplace to shape educational reform (p. 438).

Carney (2009) takes this concept further, first describing the predominant role market capitalism has played in Comparative Education literature, and then arguing that "economic values and systems" have changed the way people and states relate to one another (p. 64). It has further changed the "very understandings that we have of what it means to be educated" (Carney, 2009, p. 64). Education is framed as necessary for accessing global markets and the key to alleviating economic hardship (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Stambach, 2003). It is also often blamed for economic decline (Davies & Guppy, 1997). In this way, scholars conceptualize school choice as part of economic globalization, but also problematize global capitalism (Apple, 1999; McLaren, 1999). Within economic globalization, school choice is both a result of market-based educational goals and a vehicle for promoting economic values through education. As neoliberal policies like school choice persist and grow, people will increasingly think about education in the context of the economy.

More specifically, James et al. (2010) describe the way that neoliberal policies like school choice assume that markets allocate resources effectively and efficiently. Because educational markets deal with schooling, they inherently commodify education (James et al., 2010, p. 629). School choice policies create competition between schools, and assume that individuals select schools using rational cost-benefit analyses. Through these assumptions, and accompanying practices, they encourage people to behave as consumers when they choose a school. According to Forsey, Davies, and Walford (2008), such processes encourage a "consumerist ethic that is difficult to resist" (p. 9). The idea of choice "reflects and evokes deep desires for autonomy, control and self-expression" (Forsey et al., 2008, p. 10). However, choice's promise masks the way choice is confined by its commodification. Consumers of education begin to think of schooling as a product to be valued for its economic worth, and regulate their decisions accordingly.

At the same time, James et al. (2010) and Forsey et al. (2008) also argue that neoliberalism assumes an understanding of human decision-making that is limited and problematic. According to Forsey et al. (2008), viewing people as motivated solely by "maximizing economic benefits" is a deeply flawed and inadequate way to understand human behavior (p. 12). This provides some insight into the complex and contradictory nature of neoliberal reforms. Even as school choice policies encourage "consumers" to value education for its economic worth, the

policies fail to recognize that humans rarely make purely economic decisions. Under such conditions, it would seem that non-economic educational priorities are not eliminated, but become increasingly invisible.

*An Indicator of Institutional Globalization?*

Comparativists studying school choice also test the transnational spread of school choice policies against World Polity Theory. Astiz (2002) defines institutional globalization as “convergence toward a uniform model of polity and rationalization... [which] tends to create isomorphic polities, reinforcing uniform patterns among organizational structures in these sectors” (p. 67). This idea fits with neoinstitutionalist understandings of globalization, which highlight similarities across national policies. Indeed, the way that school choice has been adopted across the globe can be seen as evidence supporting notions of educational policy convergence (Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008). According to Gulson and Fataar (2011), “neoliberalism has become the dominant characterization and form of education, in which international, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations are important policy players” (p. 269). While some scholars (e.g., St. Clair & Belzer, 2007) see institutionalism as an adequate framework for understanding neoliberal reforms as a global phenomenon, most view the institutional perspective as, at best, partially useful. Even as scholars see educational policies converging, they see this characterization as insufficient for understanding the way school choice works.

For instance, Davies and Guppy (1997) describe institutional globalization as inherently tied to the bureaucratic form of the modern nation-state (p. 440). From this perspective, bureaucrats and educational professionals would be important actors, creating policies that make a given nation-state’s educational system appear legitimate. However, momentum for school choice initiatives has come from local, grassroots actors as well as powerful neoconservative advocates (Davies & Guppy, 1997). This results in what Davies and Guppy (1997) call “*squeezing power from the middle*” (p. 459, emphasis in original). Through choice policies advocated both at the grassroots and the policy level, they argue, “power is being wrested from educational professionals, teacher unions, and ministry officials” and is being “redistributed upward to more senior state officials *and* downward to local groups” (p. 459, emphasis in original). As such neoinstitutional descriptions of neoliberal educational policies insufficiently describes the power dynamics in transnational market-based reforms.

*A Reproducer of Inequality*

In seeking to look beyond the policy level of analysis, Comparative and International Education scholars have looked to the ways in which neoliberal policies affect the populations where they are implemented. The literature comes to consensus around the idea that neoliberal reforms like school choice reproduce “a social system that exacerbates social inequality” (Forsey et al., 2008, p. 9; see also Apple, 1999). Even though choice policies often claim to provide increased access to quality education for the poor, that promise has failed to materialize. Indeed, market-based reforms have shown to disproportionately benefit economically privileged classes (Ball, 1993; James et al., 2010; Sung, 2011). However, these benefits occur in less obvious ways under neoliberal policies.

According to James et al. (2010), middle- and upper-class families bring social and cultural capital to the realm of educational choice, placing them in an advantaged position for choosing the “best” schools. Privileged families have the cultural knowledge and connections to effectively navigate the system in order to select high performing schools. However, James et al. (2010) also find that white middle-class families in Britain benefit more than poor and working

class families, regardless of which schools they choose (i.e., choose schools that do not align with norms of what constitutes a “good” school). Even when privileged children do not attend the “best” schools, they succeed more often than their less privileged peers (James et al., 2010, p. 637). By focusing on singular measures of school quality, choice mechanisms distract from the fact that—regardless of which school they attend—children from different economic backgrounds achieve at different levels. However, by placing such instances in the context of neoliberal school choice, the embedded nature of inequality is masked by individual choice.

Moreover, Gulson & Fataar (2011) argue that school choice, as an aspect of neoliberal globalization, must be seen in terms of unequal allocation of power. This unequal power distribution must also be understood with regard to colonial histories. In South Africa, for example, “while choice has been posited as a possible way for Black parents to obtain a better education for their children, it has also reinforced historically White privilege in post-apartheid South Africa” (Gulson & Fataar, 2011, p. 274). Even though school choice policies can be seen as tools for the poor and working classes to access quality education, scholars agree that it actually reproduces existing inequality in various forms.

The most problematic aspect of the way neoliberal policies reproduce inequality, however, is the way they justify that inequality. According to Gulson and Fataar (2011), achievement is directly associated with aspirations. As they argue, “responsibility for not achieving high academic results, and for not raising the educational standards of the entire system, lies with families and students who have low or no aspirations” (p. 279). In this way, neoliberal policies and their accompanying discourse encourage placing responsibility for inequality upon the individual. People begin to understand low achievement as correlated not with disadvantage or with poverty, but with low aspirations. The logic of neoliberal reform, therefore, masks inequality and needs to be resisted, whether through measured reforms or more revolutionary transformations (Apple, 1999; McLaren, 1999).

The inequality resulting from school choice policies brings another contradiction to bear. Choice policies have been promoted as populist, grass-roots reform efforts, often led by parent groups (Davies & Guppy, 1997). Such movements claim that choice policies are responsive to community needs, empowering teachers and parents (Astiz et al., 2002). Yet Davies and Guppy (1997) argue that teachers actually lose power under choice policies, and others show that empowered parents generally come from the middle- and upper-classes (Ball, 1993; James et al., 2010; Sung, 2011).

According to Ball (1993), middle-class parents felt their social positions were threatened by “the increasing social democratic de-differentiation of schools, the cultural reform of the curriculum... and the diversion of resources to those with greatest learning needs and difficulties” (p. 16). In this way, Ball (1993) argues that middle class parents fear losing positions of comfort, particularly in the context of progressive reforms intended to equalize educational opportunity. By advocating for choice policies, middle class parents (whether unwittingly or intentionally) support policies that secure their own positions while preventing others from accessing the same privileges. This position, coupled with the neoliberal logic of aspiration (Gulson & Fataar, 2011) allows middle class families “the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged” (Bourdieu & Passeron, as cited in Ball, 1993).

#### *A Locally Global Phenomenon*

The extent to which school choice policies have been adopted transnationally is mediated by the way local contexts shape and adapt neoliberal policies (Astiz, 2002). Even as policies look

increasingly similar across nation-states, those policies become “globalized messages projected across educational spaces and translated in ways that resonate in particular contexts” (Carney, 2009, p. 69). In this way, neoliberal policies are not only “borrowed” across policy contexts, but are re-created and modified to fit local needs. As school choice policies operate transnationally, then, they play out in ways that reflect both local specificity and global universality.

*Borrowed and Adapted*

While scholars recognize that school choice policies have, to some extent, been borrowed across policy contexts, they also emphasize the ways in which localities interpret and modify policies to fit historical understandings and cultural needs. According to Stambach’s (2003) study of missionary-supported choice policies in Tanzania, the idea of choice had “been layered onto historically and culturally non-Western understandings of transaction and personhood and imbued with alternative registers of meaning” (p. 155). In this way, Stambach (2003) shows that “choices are not the same everywhere” (p. 157). Forsey et al. (2008) similarly argue that neoliberal constructs must be understood by focusing on the way school choice policies “assume a wide variety of incarnations” across different nation-states (p. 22).

*Universal and Specific*

Further, scholars propose that globalization can be understood by looking at the way local actors adapt neoliberal policies to fit specific contexts. School choice policies can bridge the local and global because they engage language flexible enough to incorporate diverse interests (Forsey et al., 2008). Even though neoliberal choice policies naturally fit with conservative economic thinkers, the policies have attracted religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities who co-opt school choice vocabularies to fit their specific interests (Forsey et al., 2008, p. 22; see also Stambach, 2003). In this way, school choice can be understood as serving local needs through the language of neoliberal policies. However, school choice policies are often applied as if they have “no geographic and historic specificities” (Gulson & Fataar, 2011, p. 270). While neoliberal reforms are transnational in nature and take on a global mystique, it is imperative to consider them through the lens of locality and specificity.

It is also important to recognize, as Stambach (2003) highlights, the fact that those with a certain amount of transnational power—like the American missionaries who promoted choice policies in Tanzania—are not simply purveyors of universal ideas while Tanzanian actors represent the local. As she states, the Tanzanian parents “are not any more ‘particularistic’ in their cultural views than the missionaries are ‘universalistic.’ That is, even though the missionaries’ views are more likely to be taken up in the institutionalized forms of schooling, both missionaries and Tanzanians have localized visions of universal forms of schooling” (Stambach, 2003, p. 158). The American missionaries brought specific localized visions of school choice policies, while Tanzanian parent had different ways of understanding school choice from their specific local context. Even as choice policies represent transnational neoliberal policies, they must be reconstituted and interpreted by local actors in unique contexts.

From another angle, however, “Choice in theory, should make schooling more responsive to regional concerns... Yet paradoxically these measures also strengthen various universalist creeds and give central administrative bodies some added authority” (Davies & Guppy, 1997, p. 456). Just as hegemonic, universalizing notions of neoliberal reforms appear to spread across the globe, local contexts interpret and reconstruct meaning around those policies. In many instances, they use such dominant policy discourses to further their own interests. At the same time that they use school choice to promote specific local interests, they encourage the spread of neoliberal discourse.

### *A Ubiquitous Discourse*

Not only have neoliberal policies themselves been borrowed and adapted across nation-states, but neoliberal discourses have undergone the same processes. According to Sung (2011), in Korea, “loanwords” have been borrowed from English-language rhetoric, creating local policy reforms. In this way, loanwords (particularly those transferred from a developed country) carry symbolic power over policy creation, while also allowing the receiving language to adapt the loanwords to create new meaning (Sung, 2011). This works particularly well for neoliberal constructs like choice because its loose framework allows people to incorporate their own priorities within market-based language (Forsey, 2008). However, the ways in which local actors make sense of those meanings are simultaneously shaped by a discourse that permeates across contexts.

Even as local actors ascribe meaning to neoliberal discourse, people conceive of education within the framework of those ideals. According to Apple (1999), educational issues have increasingly been framed in terms of a neoliberal agenda. As the discourse of markets, choice, and economic competitiveness frame policies, conversations, and thoughts about education, the logic of neoliberalism gains a “common-sense” quality. It becomes natural to think about education in terms of its economic utility, or to associate positive notions of liberty and autonomy with conceptions of individual choice. However, it is important to interrogate neoliberal “common-sense” ideology to reveal its “hidden effects” (Apple, 1999, p. 8).

### *A Technology for Global Governance*

Similarly hidden are neoliberalism’s methods for governance. According to Carney (2009), rather than governing through direct state control, neoliberalism implements “invisible or embedded processes of power” (p. 65). In this way, neoliberal governmentality uses notions of autonomy, personal responsibility, and choice to govern through flat, dispersed loci of control (Gulson & Fataar, 2011). Choice, then, can be seen as a technology that uses decentralization to implement new forms of control (Carney, 2009). Most concretely, the choices available to people under neoliberal policies have often been more limited than opportunities available before choice policies were implemented. Not only are people presented with a limited range of choices, but they also have “no choice but to choose” under such policies (Forsey et al., 2008). In this way, people are disciplined to think in accordance with market principles and to discipline their choices to fit expectations.

### **Evaluating School Choice Scholarship**

The literature on globalization and school choice from the field of Comparative and International Education provides a complex and nuanced understanding of the way choice policies work across transnational contexts. However, it is also important to evaluate scholarship for its methodology. The scholars referenced above have shown that neoliberal reforms like school choice policies must be interrogated for their negative implications. However, neoliberal constructs are not simply manifested at the policy level and, as such, cannot simply be eliminated by advocating for policy changes. Neoliberal reforms present a much slipperier problem. Neoliberal discourse and governance influence the way people think about education, its role in their lives, and its role in various contexts across the globe. For this reason, it is necessary to re-think the way scholars research neoliberal policies.

A possibility for interrogating the way scholars evaluate school choice policies can be found in the work of Robertson and Dale (2008). In order to move beyond traditional modes of contemporary transnational research, they propose four key assumptions that must be overcome. Recognizing and breaking free of these assumptions is necessary in order to understand global phenomena outside the confines of outmoded methodological categories and static spaces. Using these assumptions, “methodological nationalism,” “methodological statism,” “methodological educationism,” and “spatial fetishism,” (Robertson & Dale, 2008) this section analyzes transnational school choice research to ascertain whether the existing literature has succeeded in moving past static categories to interrogate school choice reforms.

#### *Methodological Nationalism*

According to Robertson and Dale (2008), educational research has traditionally focused on the nation-state as its unit of analysis. Yet that habit has restricted the possibilities for how scholars do comparative research. As educational policies become transnational, it is necessary to explore them without seeing the nation-state as a fixed entity, and the only available unit of analysis.

Many Comparative and International Education scholars studying school choice policies use nation-states as their primary units of analysis (James et al., 2010; Sung, 2011; Davies & Guppy, 1997). However, they do so while describing the ways in which policy discourse and practice has permeated national boundaries. Stambach (2003) uses Tanzania as her study’s context, but her ethnography focuses on the interactions between Tanzanian families and American missionaries. The ethnography takes place within the Tanzanian policy context, but also focuses on powerful transnational actors. Stambach (2003) accounts for differences between the families she studies and the national-level policymakers, even though they are both Tanzanian. Acknowledging the unique backgrounds of various actors, she moves beyond simply focusing on the nation-state to understand the issue with local interest. In this way, it is important for scholars to move past the local-global binary to analyze connections and flows across borders and across units of analysis.

Carney (2009) intentionally attempts to analyze school choice by “working across different levels of the education systems” in the three countries he studies (p. 63). In doing so, he follows Appadurai (1996; 2000) by creating a policyscape as his unit of analysis. That policyscape, he argues, crosses national boundaries but embodies neoliberal ideologies. He explores transnational relations by exploring practices in both government policy and grassroots organizations. Interestingly, he chooses three countries in which to construct a policyscape. Even as he seeks to break free from traditional units of analysis, he uses nation-states to construct his policyscape. While his exercise was useful in pushing the field to think about the way it analyzes policy, it did not entirely move past a focus on the nation-state. His ideas are helpful for understanding the ways in which neoliberal policies can exist across spaces. By looking at both Carney (2009) and Stambach (2003), comparativists move closer to understanding how written school choice policies and enacted school choice practices play out in both universal and specific ways across contexts.

#### *Methodological Statism*

Methodological statism assumes that each nation-state is organized and managed in the same way. Under this assumption, the state is represented “as a universal form rather than a particular representation that has been universalized” (Robertson & Dale, 2008, p. 23). Further, Robertson and Dale (2008) encourage researchers to interrogate the state as a locus of power.

They suggest studying educational governance by looking at the way different actors coordinate activity to construct and deliver education (Robertson & Dale, 2008, p. 24).

Scholars of school choice have begun to interrogate methodological statism in some of the ways they conceive of global governmentality. Forsey et al. (2008), Carney (2009), and Gulson and Fataar (2011) describe the ways in which neoliberalism governs in new ways, outside the realm of state control. In this respect, research on school choice has particularly lent itself to overcoming methodological statism. A prime example of power located outside the realm of traditional state organization, neoliberal governmentality must continue to serve as a lens through which scholars understand school choice reforms.

However, scholars have not necessarily interrogated the extent to which different nation-states operate with different organization and administration. St. Clair and Belzer (2007) explore educational systems according to their relative centralization or decentralization. However, more research questioning the way choice policies play out among governments with varying structures is necessary in order to better understand school choice as a transnational policy phenomenon. Particularly with regard to neoliberal policies and implementation, studies of school choice in nation-states that proclaim Keynesian or Socialist economic policies (e.g., Finland), as compared to firmly neoliberal countries (e.g., the United States).

#### *Methodological Educationism*

Assumptions behind methodological educationism see education as something “fixed, abstract and absolute” (Robertson & Dale, 2008, p. 25). The norms and assumptions behind what education should be and do are not questioned. According to Robertson and Dale (2008), “It also usefully disguises the role of education in capitalist systems, as a tool for social stratification” (p. 25). They propose that researchers question assumed educational practice, politics, and outcomes.

As shown above, many scholars of school choice have highlighted the extent to which neoliberal education reforms have reproduced inequitable social structures (Ball, 1993; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Astiz et al., 2002; Forsey, 2008; James et al., 2010; Gulson & Fataar, 2011; Sung, 2011). Particularly, scholars have focused on the role school choice policies play in global capitalism, suggesting that neoliberal reforms should be seen as culpable for sustaining unjust economic structures (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Astiz, et al., 2002; Carney, 2009). Neoliberalism in general has been interrogated across various disciplines as a hegemonic force to be resisted. However, it is also important for comparativists to consider the boundaries of education with relation to other sectors, as well as public and community outcomes of education. Under neoliberal policies, it is particularly important to question the extent to which choice promotes schooling’s commodification.

#### *Spatial Fetishism*

Robertson and Dale (2008) emphasize the importance of questioning the influence of space on educational phenomena. Spatial fetishism involves viewing space as “timeless and static” rather than historical and in flux (Brenner, cited in Robertson & Dale, 2008, p. 28). They further challenge researchers to move beyond simply describing issues as “global.” Rather, a deeper exploration of context, at multiple levels, must be explored.

The research reviewed in this paper has described transnational school choice as global, and has sought to explicate the implications of school choice as a global phenomenon. In this way, they do not treat “the global” as a static and self-evident concept, but rather as one that must be

explored and questioned. However, fewer researchers have specifically sought to explore a multi-layered context that is situated in dynamic time and space. Robertson and Dale (2008) suggest moving beyond the local-global binary to describe a phenomena across multiple scales. Carney (2009) and Stambach (2003), in particular, analyze school choice policies with specific regard to spatial locality. They both orient their studies to specific times and places, but also acknowledge the multiple levels on which their subjects interact. Given the way neoliberalization has been theorized as multiple, contingent, and on-going, empirical studies must avoid designing studies that position school choice policies and practices as monolithic or static. Even as school choice is enacted, shifts, and responds to critique, researchers must interrogate its nuances and processes, even as they unfold.

### Conclusions

As a greater number of nations across the globe have adopted choice policies, scholars have increasingly described the policies as part of a global school reform model. Scholars who seek to understand school choice as a global phenomenon have conceptualized globalization in varying, but complementary ways. Scholars have critiqued school choice as a neoliberal construct, which has reproduced existing forms of inequality through its seemingly inescapable discourse and governmentality. As part of these critiques, some scholars have ventured toward new methods of researching and analyzing school choice policies. Scholars should follow the lead of scholars like Stambach and Carney in order to not only forge new methods of scholarly investigation, but also to problematize existing neoliberal constructs. By seeking to break down traditional categories and modes of analysis, they have begun to open opportunities to imagine alternative modes of education and governance.

*Beth Wright* is a doctoral candidate in Cultural and educational policy studies. Email: [bwright3@luc.edu](mailto:bwright3@luc.edu).

### References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appadurai, A. (2000). Grassroots globalization and the research imagination. *Public Culture*, 12(1), 1–19.
- Apple, M. (1999). Rhetorical reforms: Markets, standards and inequality. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 1(2).
- Astiz, M., Wiseman, A., & Baker, D. (2002). Slouching towards decentralization: Consequences of globalization for curricular control in national education systems. *Comparative Education Review*, 46(1), 66-88.
- Ball, S. (1993). Education markets, choice and social class: The market as a class strategy in the UK and the USA. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14(1), 3-19.
- Bartlett, L., Frederick, M., Gulbrandsen, T., & Murillo, E. (2002). Marketization of education: Public schools for private ends. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 33(1), 5-29.
- Brenner, N., Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2009). Variegated neoliberalization: Geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global Networks*, 10(2), 182-222.
- Carney, S. (2009). Negotiating policy in an age of globalization: Exploring educational “policyscapes” in Denmark, Nepal, and China. *Comparative Education Review*, 53(1), 63-88.
- Collier, S., & Ong, A. (2005). Global assemblages, anthropological problems. In Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (Eds.). *Global assemblages: Technology, politics and ethics as anthropological problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

- Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (1997). Globalization and educational reforms in Anglo-American democracies. *Comparative Education Review*, 41(4), 435-459.
- Dean, M. (2010). *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- England, K., & Ward, K. (2007). *Neoliberalization: States, networks, peoples*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Forsey, M., Davies, S., & Walford, G. (2008). *The globalisation of school choice?* Oxford, UK: Symposium Books.
- Friedman, M. (1955). The role of government in education. In Robert A. Solo (Ed.) *Economics and the public interest*. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Gulson, K., & Fataar, A. (2011). Neoliberal governmentality, schooling and the city: Conceptual and empirical notes on and from the Global South. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(2), 269-283.
- Hindess, B. (2004). Liberalism—what’s in a name? In Larner and Walters (Eds.). *Global governmentality: Governing international spaces*. New York: Routledge.
- James, D., Reay, D., Crozier, G., Beedell, P., Hollingworth, S., Jamieson, F., & Williams, K. (2010). Neoliberal policy and the meaning of counterintuitive middle-class school choices. *Current Sociology*, 58(4), 623-641.
- McLaren, P. (1999). Contesting capital: Critical pedagogy and globalism-A response to Michael Apple. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 1(2).
- Mudge, S. (2008). What is neo-liberalism? *Socio-Economic Review*, 6(4), 703-731.
- Peet, R., & Hartwick, E. (2009). *Theories of development: Contentions, arguments, alternatives* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Robertson, S., & Dale, R. (2008). Researching education in a globalising era: Beyond methodological nationalism, methodological statism, methodological educationism and spatial fetishism. In J. Resnik (Ed.), *The Production of Educational Knowledge in the Global Era*, 19-32. Sense Publishers.
- Rose, N. (1996). Governing ‘advanced’ liberal democracies. In Nikolas Rose, Andrew Barry, and Thomas Osborne (Eds.) *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and rationalities of government*. London: UCL Press.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Stambach, A. (2003). World-cultural and anthropological interpretations of ‘choice programming’ in Tanzania. In *Local meanings, global schooling: anthropology and world culture theory*, Kathryn Anderson-Levit (Ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- St Clair, R., & Belzer, A. (2007). In the market for ideas: How reforms in the political economy of educational research in the US and UK promote market managerialism. *Comparative Education*, 43(4), 471-488.
- Sung, Y. (2011). Cultivating borrowed futures: The politics of neoliberal loanwords in South Korean cross-national policy borrowing. *Comparative Education*, 47(4), 523-538.