

# **The influences of globalisation in education policy-making: the case of the charter schools in the Province of San Luis, Argentina**

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## **Contextualisation**

This paper combines insights from the fields of educational policy and sociology, regarding the nature and impact of globalisation in national education policy, with empirical data from a particular policy-borrowing process in Argentina. Although there is extensive theoretical literature on the mechanisms by which globalisation trends influence national policy, few scholars have paid attention to the practical ways in which these global ideas shape and are disseminated in local contexts. This article is part of the growing body of literature that looks at the particular ways in which global discourses penetrate local settings.

**Abstract:** *This paper analyses to what extent specific educational reforms, in local contexts, respond to influences generally associated with the process of globalisation and the ways in which this might occur. More specifically, it looks at the origins and intentions of the Charter School policy in the Argentine province of San Luis. It aims to shed light on the practical ways in which global discourses penetrate local contexts. The paper begins by describing the context in which the charter policy took place. It then explores the transformations proposed by the policy and their link to global trends. The mechanisms, by which these international ideas were disseminated, in this particular local context, are then examined. To conclude, the paper suggests some explanations for the recent expansion of similar, educational and political, responses throughout the world.*

## **Introduction**

The Charter School policy in Argentina is one example of the many attempts to restructure and deregulate state schooling that have characterised the educational policy arena during the last decades in many different countries. In the Argentine context, this policy presented an innovative package of new ‘solutions’ for educational ‘problems’ that radically transformed the traditional relationship between the state and education. It was the first attempt by a provincial government in the country, to undertake an educational policy, aimed at enhancing market flexibility. It also sought to encourage privatisation and competition within state provision – all reforms which are generally associated with global policy trends.

This study concentrates on the analysis of how global discourses affected the charter policy origins (context of influence) and its intentions, rather than on the process of policy implementation or practice. Two fundamental policy texts and several interviews of relevant policy makers<sup>1</sup> are analysed and arguments as to the extent of international influences in the

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<sup>1</sup> The first document is the project’s draft law that was presented by the executive power to the provincial parliament for discussion (2001 School Law Project). This law, created by provincial policy makers with the help of external advisors, and with almost no civil discussion, was finally never sanctioned, but it presents openly the original intentions of the proposed policy. The second document, *El movimiento de las charter schools. Una amenaza y una oportunidad para la educación pública Argentina* (The Charter School Movement. A Threat and an Opportunity for Argentinean Public

project and how these influences were disseminated are posed. The paper is organized in four parts. The first part sets the scene by situating the charter policy in the Argentine context. The second examines the different transformations that the charter policy proposed, and their link with global trends, focusing on the reshaped relationship between the state and education. The third looks at the ways in which international ideas were disseminated, by analysing empirically some of the mechanisms through which global responses were produced in the province of San Luis. Finally, the conclusion forms the fourth part of the paper and explores some of the reasons that could account for the widespread expansion of similar political responses in the educational arena around the world.

## **The Charter Policy in the Argentine Context**

To analyse the influences of global trends on a particular educational policy we need to bear in mind that globalisation is not a process that identically affects education policies around the world. As many authors suggest, to think that globalisation produces a homogenised scenario in different contexts is to over simplify a much more complex reality (Dale, 1999; Green, 2003; Lingard and Rizvi, 2000). Global trends do not mechanically influence local policies. On the contrary, global and local spheres articulate with each other and create a specific hybrid that is distinctive and unique. The effects of globalisation are always mediated by local patterns and structures that modify, reshape, filter, interpret and select specific aspects from external trends. There is always a 'process of translation and recontextualisation involved in the realisation or enactment of policy in specific national and local settings' (Ball, 1998, p 1). However, despite the uniqueness of every educational policy, there is a clear and visible set of influences behind current educational reforms that constitute a common trend which cannot be ignored.

In the last two decades several countries undertook political reforms that responded to global general patterns (decentralisation, deregulation, privatisation, etc). In Argentina, the 90s have been the scenario of such transformations. In the educational arena, the decentralisation process that concluded in 1991<sup>2</sup> together with the Federal Law of Education, sanctioned in 1993, were probably the most important reforms in this sense. The decentralisation process resulted in each Argentine province becoming responsible for the management of schools within their territory (before the federal act several schools were managed by the federal government). On the other hand, the Federal Law of Education completed the federalisation process by defining a change in the functions as well as a shift in the power relations between the nation state and the provincial state<sup>3</sup>. Although these reforms had clear global origins (see Rhoten, 2000), in most cases they did not imply transformations toward the main changes associated with educational globalisation, such as the dismantling of centralized bureaucracies and the enhancement of institutional autonomy and parental choice (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998).

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Schooling), was written by Antonio Cicioni, who was one of the most influential external advisors in the definition of the charter project in San Luis. The interviews were made to the former Governor of the Province of San Luis, the former Minister of Education, the former Sub-Secretary of Education and two policy advisors. Four of these interviews were made by Carolina Nahón between November 2001 and March 2002 in the context of a research project that CIPPEC (Centre for the Implementation of Public Policies fostering Equity and Growth) was carrying out with the objective of analysing the implementation process of this policy. The last one was made by Mario Otero, a journalist, for a radio programme called Nada en Secreto (Nothing Secret) in November 1999. The documents and interviews were facilitated to me by CIPPEC.

<sup>2</sup> This process was regulated in the Law for the Transfer of Educational Services N° 24.409

<sup>3</sup> The effects of this shift in power varied in the different Argentinean regions. As Rhoten shows in her study (2000), the outcomes of such transformations were 'conditioned by the material capacities as well as the symbolic identities of the different implementing localities' (p 607)

In contrast to what might have been expected after the transformations, most provincial educational systems continued to be administered in very similar ways to how they were administered before, but, instead of being managed by the federal state, they were managed by provincial governments (Narodowski and Nores, 2003). In most cases, the power given to the provincial states for regulating and administering their educational systems was not used in order to apply the set of reforms associated with globalisation. The government of San Luis was, in fact, the only regional government that perceived these new regulations as an opportunity to undertake ‘...an innovative educational paradigm anchored in new types of relations between the state, the schools and the community...’ (Nahón, 2002a). The Peronist Party, which had ruled the province since 1983 with Adolfo Rodríguez Saa as the only governor for more than 19 years, promoted several educational reforms under this new paradigm<sup>4</sup>. These reforms challenged the traditional organisation of public schooling in the country.

In this context, the Charter School policy brought into play innovation in the regulation, administration and finance of public schools. This policy intended to introduce new elements not only into the province but also into the country: market forces and parental choice. This is particularly significant, considering that Argentina has an important tradition of public schooling with very strong welfare mechanisms. Since its foundation at the end of the nineteenth century, the public Argentine educational system has been state-funded, state-regulated and state-provided. The particular challenges proposed by the charter school policy make it a unique setting in which to examine the way in which global ideas impact on specific educational reforms.

## Responses and Influences of Global Trends

This section explores the main changes proposed by the charter policy, focusing on the new relations generated between the state and education and looking at the global influences underpinning these transformations. It considers the charter policy project as an archetypal response to globalisation. At the same time, it assumes that the existence of these kind of ‘package responses’ that have been spreading all around the globe in the last decades are a way of reinforcing the dominance of global trends. The examination of the intended transformations is done by analysing the policy’s text production and the policy-makers discourse<sup>5</sup>.

A good starting point to analyse how global trends define, and re-define, the decisions and actions of states in particular national, and local settings, is by considering the two ideal typical state responses to globalisation suggested by Brown and Lauder (1997): Neo-Fordism and Post-Fordism. According to these authors, each model of economic development is underpinned by different ideological assumptions; different beliefs about the role of the state and, of course, different implications for social justice. On the one hand, Neo-Fordism ‘can be characterized as creating greater market flexibility through a reduction in social overheads and the power of trade unions; as encouraging the privatisation of public

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of these reforms are: a) the complete reformulation of the teacher training system at provincial level, b) the restructuring in the way schools directors are assigned, c) the implementation of different strategies to promote a result oriented management at schools through, for example, student achievement evaluations and new supervision systems and, of course, d) the charter schools themselves (Nahón, 2002b).

<sup>5</sup> Although various perspectives and intentions existed amongst policy-makers regarding the Charter School project at its different stages, this study focuses on analysis of the policy origins, drawing on the first policy texts, and on the most influential policy maker’s discourses. Looking at the overlapping dislocations, contradictions and fractures, between discourses at different stages of the process, would require a different approach.

utilities and the welfare state; and as celebrating competitive individualism' (*ibid*, p 176). In education, the key concepts would be diversity, competition and choice. On the other hand, Post-Fordism 'can be defined in terms of the development of the state as a 'strategic leader', shaping the direction of the national economy through investment in key economic sectors and in the development of human capital' (*ibid*, p 176). Although aspects of these two responses contradict each other as much as they correspond, it is clear that the Charter School project in San Luis is embedded in the first model.

In order to trace the influences of globalisation in the charter policy, this part of the paper looks at the ways in which the three aspects that Brown and Lauder recognize as fundamental in the Neo-Fordism response to global change took place in the province of San Luis. These are: a) creation of market flexibility; b) encouragement of the privatisation of public utilities and the welfare state; and, c) celebration of competitive individualism. These three dimensions are presented in separated sections in order to facilitate the analysis, although, as will be shown, they are closely interrelated to one another and they draw on the same general discourses.

### **Creation of market flexibility: teacher work force liberalisation**

This section focuses on neo-liberalism as the main discourse promoting and legitimating the replacement of state allocation mechanisms by market mechanisms in the charter policy. The charter school policy proposed the creation of markets in at least three different spheres: a) in the school's educational and non-educational labour force; b) in the provision of services and goods within the schools; and, c) in the educational system – by creating school diversity and promoting choice mechanisms for parents. The following paragraphs concentrate mainly on the first sphere (ie, the liberalisation of the labour force) and its effects on the relation between the state and education. The deregulation of the provision of goods and services within the schools (second sphere) is not analysed because it has been hardly considered in the origins and intentions of the policy<sup>6</sup>. Finally, the idea of establishing school markets by deregulating the public school provision of education is left for the following sections, as it is very much linked to the encouragement of privatisation and the development of competition.

A major pillar of the neo-liberal discourse is the idea of enhancing markets. As Narodowski and Nores point out 'neo-liberalism is related to a series of measures towards opening and deregulating the economy, deregulating the labour market, restricting union activities, and allowing a more inflexible use of labour force within a competitive arena' (2003, p 139). This discourse is based on the idea that markets are the most efficient way to achieve better quality and higher efficiency. In San Luis, the deregulation of the educational labour force brought about a fundamental change in the organisation of the educational public system.

Traditionally, Argentina has had national and provincial statutory laws that regulate in detail not only the allocation of teachers to positions in public schools<sup>7</sup> but also their working conditions (salaries, leaves, holy days, etc). In the Charter School project, schools that were traditionally run by the provincial state are contracted out to 'educational associations' for a period of at least five years. These means that school staff that were previously allocated into schools through state-bureaucratic mechanisms and hired by the state are now selected and employed by the 'educational association' responsible for the management of the school.

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<sup>6</sup> It was not mentioned in the 2001 Schools Law or in the interviews.

<sup>7</sup> Teaching positions in public schools are assigned through very strict mechanisms of rating boards. Educational staff are classified within different categories: qualifications are assigned (usually associated with their previous experience and education) as a result. When a teaching position is free, it is offered to the person who, on this basis, has the highest qualification.

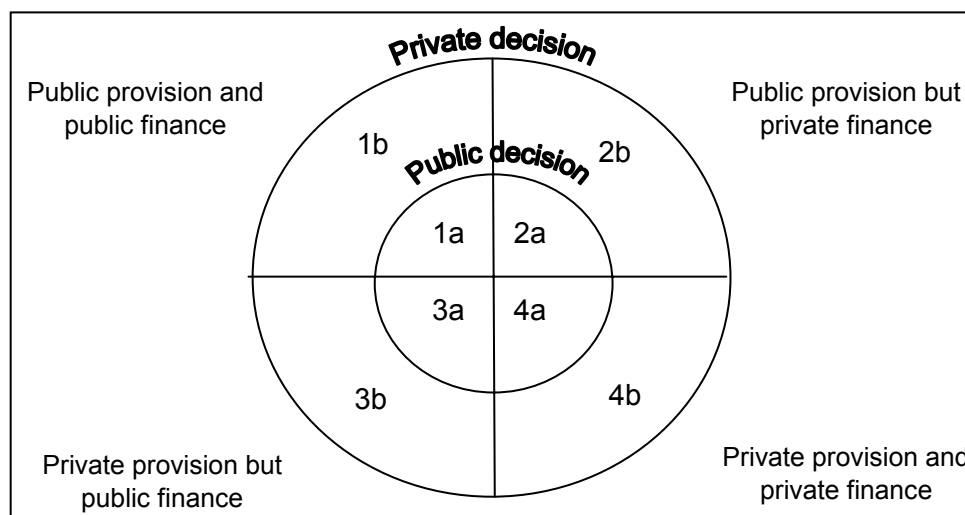
This involved a radical change in the way staff were hired: teachers were no longer public employees and became hired staff of a non-profit organisation. Thus, they gave up those traditional privileges associated with the status of educators (ie, stability, a seniority bonus, etc) and they became subject to the same working conditions as any other worker in the private sector<sup>8</sup>. The development of these 'market' rules of engagement, present in Britain and in the United States over the last twenty years, was a completely new phenomenon in Argentina (Brown and Lauder, 1997) and was one of the main objectives of the project, especially as articulated by politicians.

This new form of engagement proposed a new relationship between the state and teachers. The state was no longer responsible for regulating teachers' work and paying teachers' salaries. According to this new model, the prosperity of educational workers depends on their 'ability to trade their skills, knowledge, and entrepreneurial acumen in an unfettered global market' (Brown and Lauder, 1997, p 174), rather than on state regulations. At the same time, this model weakens the strength and power of trade unions that are no longer able to defend their common interests.

## Encouragement of school privatisation: from state to private provision

There is a general broad agreement that the privatisation of educational public utilities is one of the classical neo-liberal responses to global changes. Nonetheless, several authors argue that the definition of privatisation is often too loose to describe the specific mechanisms through which these changes are installed in specific contexts (Dale, 1997; Whitty and Power, 2000). It is frequently believed that the basic distinction between 'funding' and 'provision' is not enough to cover the multiple forms in which educational policies have restructured welfare. Based on the work done by Burchardt *et al.* (1999) cited in Whitty and Power (2000) propose a diagram where different combinations of public and private provision, funding and decision-making are shown (see Figure 1). This illustration is very useful in exposing some of the different movements associated with recent privatisation policies.

**Figure 1.** Classification of the Public and Private Welfare Activity



From: Whitty and Power, 2000 after Burchardt *et al.*, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> This means, for example, that 'educational associations' define the wages, salaries incentives and licence mechanisms for their staff (article 41 of 2001 School Law Project), all aspects that had been traditionally defined in national and provincial statutory laws.

Following this diagram we might argue that the charter schools in San Luis are privately provided, with public finance and public decision-making (3b). They are privately provided because the management of the school is the responsibility of a group of people (educational associations) that obtain this responsibility by bidding for a contract for a fixed, and renewable, period of time. They are publicly funded because the provincial state is responsible for funding the schools' costs<sup>9</sup>. Finally, charter schools belong to the public decision sphere because the framework within which services are delivered is regulated by the state. The state decides how many schools are going to be created, where, of what educational level, etc.

This position suggests that although charter schools are different from traditional public schools - which are publicly-funded, publicly-provided and have public decision-making - 1a, they do not precisely represent a privatisation policy. The fact that the funding and planning of charter schools still remains within the public domain makes it difficult to argue that education in San Luis was privatised. In this sense, it might be better to speak about 'marketisation'. Whitty and Power point out that, 'marketisation' usually '...refers to the development of 'quasi-markets' in state funded and / or state provided services...' (2000, p 94). As we shall see in the next section, the creation of self managed schools in San Luis was the first step that the provincial government took so as to establish 'quasi-markets' in the educational provision (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998). Developing school diversity (traditional public schools, charter schools and private schools<sup>10</sup>) was seen by the provincial politicians as a necessary movement towards the introduction of competition and parental choice.

The fact that in the charter policy, education provision passed from public, to private hands could mean that the state's role in education was declining. However, several authors suggest that, on the contrary, new educational global trends have strengthened the state's role (see, for example, Dale, 1997). It is probably too soon to affirm either that the role of the San Luis state has become stronger or weaker. What seems clear is that the recent reforms have changed the state's characteristics and functions. The charter policy promoted school autonomy but, at the same time, the government of San Luis encouraged policies that enhanced centralisation. Examples of such policies might be the introduction of a common curriculum, the creation of new inspector bodies and the establishment of continual student achievement evaluations. The combination of devolution policies and processes of governmental centralisation is a typical characteristic of recent educational reforms (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998).

The concept of 'Evaluative State' is very useful to interpret some of the new relations between the state and education promoted by the charter policy (Neave, 1998). The evaluative state focuses more on outcomes than processes. It is responsible for defining goals and targets; and for carrying out 'strategic evaluations' to assert the extent to which overall targets have been reached, by institutions, rather than for defining the ways in which these targets have to be reached. These are 'a posteriori evaluations' that concentrate on the results and not on the processes. These new state functions are explicit in the 2001 School Law of San Luis where the responsibilities of the state regarding the creation and maintenance of charter schools are stated. The Law declares that the provincial state is responsible for: a) the organisation of public tenders; b) establishment of the criteria of the creation new schools; c) advising, training and orientating schools; and, d) monitoring and

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<sup>9</sup> However, it is interesting to mention that charter schools are funded through a per-capita criterion and not through traditional funding methods. This funding criterion, as mentioned in the next section, is one of the mechanisms through which market mechanisms were introduced.

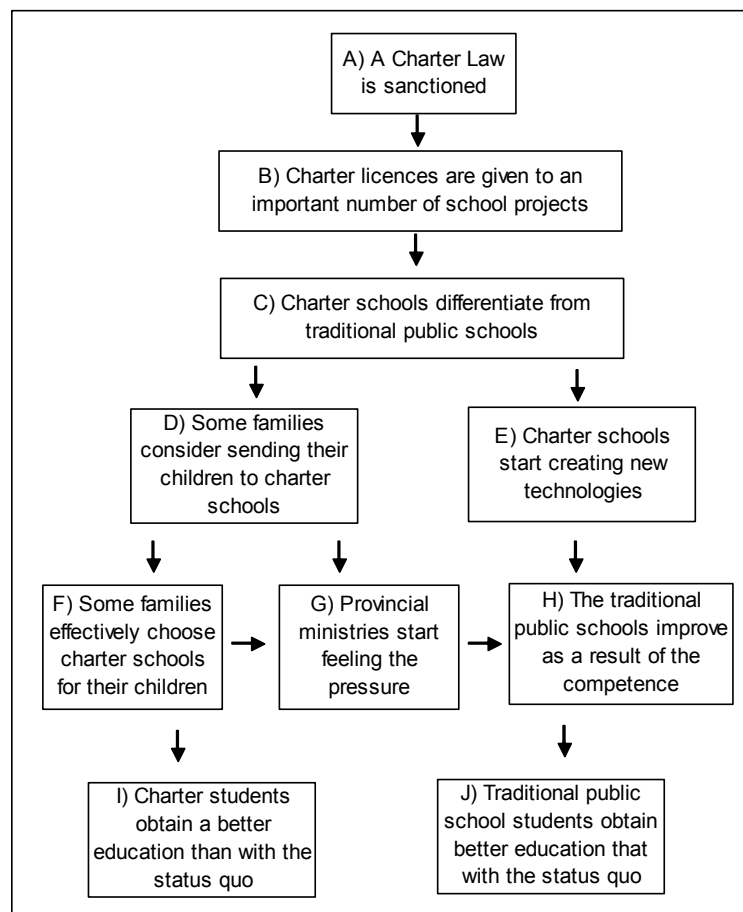
<sup>10</sup> The concept of private schools in Argentina refers to institutions with private provision (and private funding), and to institutions with private provision and subsidies from the state.

supervising schools. All these functions are linked with the establishment of long term objectives, which schools are in charge of achieving. The provincial state will evaluate their performance (in relation to the proposed objectives) and, on this basis, define if the school continues or closes down.

## Celebration of competition: the creation of educational ‘quasi-markets’

The celebration of competition is regarded as one of the pillars for educational efficiency and quality of the charter school policy and it is constantly present in the intentions and origins of the reform. As already mentioned, the introduction of Charter Schools in San Luis was seen as the first step towards the creation of quasi markets in Education. In 1998, Antonio Cicioni described the processes and effects of introducing charter schools in the Argentine public educational system using the following diagram:

**Figure 2.** The logic of Charter Schools.



From: Cicioni, 1998, p 15, based on Hassel, 1995 (author's translation).

The creation of charter schools is seen, as the diagram shows, as a direct way of achieving better educational standards through the introduction of diversity and competition. This same argument is reflected in the following quotes first from the Governor:

‘The ideal situation for San Luis would be to have a cohabitation of a group of traditional public schools, a group of privately managed schools and a group of charter schools. This mixed presence will allow the citizen to choose freely (...) hence, we are going to manage to improve the whole system’ (Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, former Governor, author’s translation).

and second from the Minister of Education of the province:

‘We thought of offering different alternatives to the public, so that parents could choose schools for their quality and service. In a way this introduces competition but what we wanted was to give different and transparent alternatives’ (Hector Omar Torino, former Minister of Education, author’s translation).

The promotion of competition mechanisms was accompanied by the creation of two new state technologies. Two control mechanisms that intended to contribute to the process of improving school’s quality and efficiency. The first technology, related to quality, was the introduction of students’ achievement tests. The publication of the tests results, through the creation of rankings between schools, was seen by policy makers as one of the basic elements through which the state could enhance fair competition between schools and, at the same time, ‘elevate educational standards’. These tests are seen as ‘neutral’ and ‘transparent’ ways of demonstrating school quality to parents, who are now responsible for choosing their children’s education<sup>11</sup>.

The second mechanism focused on efficiency and involved a redefinition of the funding procedures of schools. The charter policy introduced a per capita funding criterion. Traditionally, the school funding considered not only the number of children but also the location of the school, the number of teachers, the characteristics of the population, etc. The charter policy, instead, promoted a finance system that considered only enrolment (the number of children attending the school). This means that schools must compete for students (and funds). Thus, the combination of these two mechanisms creates a vicious competition cycle: the schools whose students obtain highest test results are the schools that have more students (as they are preferred by parents) and, as a consequence, more funding. In contrast, the schools that obtain weak positions in the league tables are the ones with fewer students and less funding.

## **How did global influences travel?**

‘Globalisation as a political phenomenon means that the shaping of the playing field of politics itself is increasingly determined not within insulated units, ie, relatively autonomous and hierarchically organized structures called states; rather it derives from a complex congeries of multilevel games played on multilayered institutional playing fields, above and across, as well as within state boundaries’ (Cerny, 1997, p 253).

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<sup>11</sup> The importance that the provincial government conferred upon student achievement tests is illustrated by the fact that San Luis was one of the two provinces in Argentina (of a total number of 24) that organized provincial evaluation tests. During the 90s, the rest of the provinces only applied the national quality tests.



This section throws light on how global influences ‘travelled’ from the north (specifically from the United States and Europe) to the south (Argentina) to shape this specific policy. It argues that there are two different ways in which global trends arrived in San Luis. On the one hand, it looks at the charter policy as an example of ‘policy borrowing’ (Dale, 1999). This process had straightforward, and empirical, mechanisms of dissemination that are explored and exemplified. These are: a) the activity of ‘policy entrepreneurs’; b) the movement of graduates; and c) the movement of ‘peoplescapes’. On the other hand, a much more subtle and indirect way of dissemination is analysed. This second channel of influence is difficult to trace empirically because it is organised as a dominant discourse that defines not only what is seen as a problem but also possible solutions.

The effects of globalisation in the charter policy context respond to the mechanism that Dale defines as ‘Policy Borrowing’. The author describes the key features of this process by pointing out ‘that it is carried out *voluntarily* and *explicitly*, and that its *locus of viability is national*. It involves *particular policies* that one country seeks to *imitate, emulate to copy, bilaterally*, from another. It is the *product of conscious decision making*, and it is *initiated by the recipient*. The nature of its effects could be expected to be *direct* and they could tend to be restricted to the sectoral or organisational level; that is to the level of education policies’ (1999, 10). The charter school reform is a clear example of this process. The reform was carried out in a voluntary way by San Luis policy makers and it was only applied in the province. It was imitated or copied from the United States of America as a conscious process and its effects were supposed to have influence only in the educational sector.

The process of ‘Policy Borrowing’ in San Luis had straightforward and empirical mechanisms through which global trends were disseminated. Contrarily to what might be expected, this project was not directly suggested or imposed on the province by supranational organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, IDB or OECD. Many authors analyse in detail the strong links between multilateral agencies’ policy recommendations and national policy implementation (Burbules and Torres, 2000; Dale, 1999; Lingard, 2000; Rhoten, 2000; Venegas, 2001; 2003). While this link was clear in the policies implemented by the Argentine government in the early nineties (which were directly ‘recommended’ and encouraged by the World Bank (Rhoten, 2000)), in the analysed data there is no mention of any discussions taking place between the province of San Luis and any supranational organisation. This absence suggests that, in this case, northern ideas travelled through a different channel.

Global ideas had at least three main mechanisms of dissemination in the charter policy. Firstly, the activity of ‘policy entrepreneurs’, defined by Ball as ‘groups and individuals who sell their solutions in the academic and political market place’ (1998, p 124), had a very significant role. The idea of introducing charter schools in the educational system of San Luis was proposed by Antonio Cicioni, a member of a non-governmental organisation - Gobierno y Sociedad, to Hector Omar Torino, the Provincial Minister of Education. Antonio Cicioni, as a representative of Gobierno y Sociedad, was in the province doing research on a previous reform, that San Luis had undertaken, and not promoting the charter schools. But when the provincial government asked the NGO for advice to introduce charter schools, the organisation accepted; and Cicioni moved to the province to manage the project.

Secondly, the information transfer carried by the movement of graduates must be considered. Antonio Cicioni, who had studied for an MA in Harvard two years before he started working in San Luis, is an example of what Dale calls ‘carriers’ of educational policy (as cited in Halpin and Tryona, 1995). In fact, Cicioni explains his connection with the charter model in the following terms:

‘My interest in the public system of self-managed schools [Charter Schools] (...) started during my post graduate degree, when I was studying an MA in Education between 1996 and 1997 in Harvard University. Later, I deepened my trust in the

charter model through an academic exchange in the United States where I had the opportunity of visiting several think tanks specializing in education in New York, Washington and San Francisco.’ (Antonio Cicioni, policy advisor and director of the project, author’s translation)

The third way in which the policy spread, which is also embedded in Antonio Cicioni’s quote, is what Lingard (2000) calls the movement of ‘peoplescapes’. The international flow of politicians, policy elites and policy intellectuals has the effect of minimizing the distance between transnational elites and their ideas. In this sense, it is significant to mention that the Governor of the province and the Subsecretary of Education mentioned trips abroad when explaining how they learned about the charter policy.

‘I was part of a delegation that went to Europe ... we went to look at the evaluation methods and the school supervision system. [we went to look at] the organisation of the educational systems in Holland, France, England and Scotland. How could we improve education quality? At that point, the idea of the self managed schools [Charter Schools] arose.’ (Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, former governor of San Luis, author’s translation).

‘We have been asking a lot [about the process of conversion between state managed schools to Charter Schools]. We went to see different experiences in Chile where this has been applied to prepare ourselves.’ (Lucia Juarez, sub secretary of education, author’s translation).

While these mechanisms – the activity of policy entrepreneurs, the movement of graduates and ‘peoplescapes’ - are quite easy to identify, there is a more subtle and indirect way in which northern ideas spread out in San Luis. As Ball (1998) suggests, global policy ideas are also disseminated, and influence national processes of policy-making, in the form of ‘orthodoxies’. In this sense, Cerny points out that globalisation, constitutes an hegemonic discourse which cuts across and gives meaning to certain categories. He argues that ‘the spread of the discourse itself alters the a priori ideas and perceptions which people have of the empirical phenomena which they encounter: in doing so, it engenders strategies and tactics which in turn may restructure the game itself’ (1997, p 256). In San Luis, international trends worked as a common sense framework to define not only the diagnosis that provincial policy-makers made of their educational system but also a framework for possible solutions and responses.

The ideological trends behind the charter policy flowed through multiple and variable channels. The character of the analysed mechanisms of dissemination suggests that global trends do ‘not simply happen as a result of imposition from the North to the South, but rather through a complex relationship of power that impacts greatly on the capability of individuals to exert change’ (Venegas, 2003, p 229).

## **Conclusions**

This study has explored, on the one hand, global influences affecting a local educational policy and, on the other hand, the different mechanisms through which these influences permeated in a particular context. Global recipes were introduced in the charter policy in San Luis through changes that reshaped the relationship between the state and education: the creation of workforce markets, the introduction of educational quasi-markets and the celebration of competition and parental choice. Far from being imposed, these global trends were spread through both visible and clear channels as well as subtle and indirect methods.

In the world context, the charter policy in San Luis is only one of many examples of recent attempts to introduce global trends into local contexts. There are many explanations that clarify the reasons for such expansion.

One explanation relates the expansion of global trends with the dual crisis of accumulation and legitimation within capitalist states (Codd, Gordon and Harker, 1997; Dale, 1997; Whitty Power and Halpin, 1998). This account explains recent reforms as attempts to tackle this crisis. Based on the idea that economic decline and social inequalities are a consequence of failures within the infrastructure and functions of the state, these reforms are centred on the dismantling of the bureaucratic state. As they place the responsibility on the way in which the state is organized, 'attention is deflected away from the essential injustices and contradictions of capitalism' (Whitty Power and Halpin, 1998, p 44).

At the same time, these reforms could be seen as effective strategies for shifting the blame for the unequal outcomes that current educational systems produce (Ball, 1998; Whitty Power and Halpin, 1998). Through devolution and parental choice policies the responsibility for education seems to move from the state to the individual parents, institutions, teachers or children.

Another explanation is related to the benefits that policy-makers see in these kinds of reforms. Firstly, as these policies distance the politicians from the results of the reform, the 'blame and responsibilities are also contracted out' (Ball, 1998, p 125). The unpopular or unwanted effects that these policies bring along can be easily blamed, as mentioned before, on individual schools, students or parents. Secondly, from the point of view of politicians, market solutions are seen as very simple and 'rational' ways of responding to the educational crisis. Ball argues that one of the main attractions of these policies is that they present themselves as a form of 'policy magic' (1998). The 'solution' for educational problems is expressed through a very simple formula that can be easily applied at local level. In the case of San Luis the formula would be as follows:

Creation of charter schools | institutional devolution = competence between  
different kind of schools | parental choice = raising standards of educational  
performance.

All these different accounts help to explain the spread of global educational policies that can be observed in the charter policy in San Luis. It would be necessary to keep on looking at recent educational reforms so as to find examples of educational policies that do not copy uncritically general global trends but, instead, propose a different and locally defined strategy to deal with the crisis that educational systems expose.

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