Comparative Policy Design Analysis: An Integrated Approach for Unpacking the Education Policies of Finland, Singapore, and Australia

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Abstract

In complementary to framing comparative policy analysis by policy cycle and policy sub-systems approaches, this article aims to articulate the policy design perspectives to comparative policy studies. We argue that comparing policy causations, policy instruments, policy interventions, and evaluation strategies across countries from different comparative angles helps to redefine the commonalities and differences that go beyond linear and multi-layered perspectives. By using the cases of the education policies of Finland, Singapore, and Australia, this article illustrates that different designs started from different conceptualisations of causations concerning the perceptions of education problems and appropriate solutions. This entry point stimulates each country to design policy goals, instruments, interventions, and evaluations. Finland has developed an equity-based education policy, while Singapore's education is merit-based, emphasising ranking systems and competition. Australia has embarked upon a market-based education policy to suit the neo-liberal conditions of the market economy. These divergences from the implication of the comparative policy design analysis framework can contribute to a better understanding of the policy domain by moving from ideation to action and learning within and across countries.

Keywords: Policy Design, Comparative Policy Analysis, Policy Instruments, Policy Intervention

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Introduction

The policy design approaches commenced in the 1970s as a response to the bureaucratic failures of policy implementation (Lowi, 1972). It is framed as developing solutions through a complex process of technical knowledge within the contextual realities by engaging multidisciplinary and multi-layered approaches (Linders and Peters, 1984). The function of policy design also goes beyond identifying and analysing problems to proposing solutions and building institutions, shaping beliefs and behaviours, facilitating progressive coalitions and improving social conditions. Welfare economics, public choices, governance machinery, democratic approaches, and developmental philosophies are considered when proposing policy alternatives since the dynamics of policy feasibility, legality, credibility, and sustainability depend on those factors (Stone, 2001). Hence, the policy design process establishes the legitimacy and efficacy of interplay among the legislative, bureaucratic, and democratic dimensions (Ingraham, 1987).

However, the success of a policy design is hinged upon the universal acceptance of the stakeholders in meeting the common policy goals. Therefore, the policy design approach needs a holistic perspective on the causal relationships behind its successes and failures since its formulation processes and the designs themselves significantly influence implementation outcomes. Recognising the novelty of policy formulation and its design approaches, the study of policy design has gained momentum in recent times. It is further explored to improve from non-design and less design to more design (Peters, 2018). The work is now probing into an integrated, democratic, and holistic approach to enable a systematic and comprehensive policy, thereby gaining impetus as a pathway to the new era of policy studies (Howlett, 2014, Peters, 2015).

This paper discusses the potential for a comprehensive policy design approach by underpinning the theoretical framework of policy design and comparative policy analysis and proposing a Comparative Policy Design Analysis (CPDA) Framework. The proposed CPDA framework is then used to unpack the education policies of Finland, Singapore and Australia by primarily looking at the commonalities and differences.

Literature Review

The approaches of policy design and comparative policy analysis are usually adopted separately to understand policy domains although it is promoted mainly by the same epistemic communities. Peters and Fontaine's (2020, 2022) work attempt to advance both fields of policy design and comparative policy analysis approach but still prefers to take them apart to shed their light. Along the same line, many studies focus on comparing policy designs or the design process of comparative policy analysis. Still, the discussions of the potential of their articulation in terms of theoretical advancements are limited (e.g., Fernández, Knill and Steinebach, 2021). Most works propose transferring policy tools across countries, which is only one dimension of policy design and comparative policy analysis (e.g., Margetts and Hood, 2016). The attempt of Howlett and Mukherjee (2018) seems to be progressive as they attempt to make a comprehensive and systematic review of comparative policy analysis that contributes to policy design. However, they do not provide a conceptual framework for the articulation within their scope of work.

The comparative policy analysis approach is considered a set of methods rather than a theoretical concept (Brans, Geva-May, and Howlett, 2017; Howlett and Mukherjee, 2019;

Lodge, 2007). The focus is on the state-of-the-art knowledge about the science, art and craft of policy analysis in different countries, to varying levels of government and by all relevant actors in and outside government who contribute to the analysis of problems and the search for policy solutions (Brans, Geva-May, and Howlett, 2017). Thus, the emphasis of the comparative policy analysis approach is also on fostering policy change through an understanding of policy transfer, diffusion, and learning (Hadjiisky, Pal, and Christopher, 2017; Peters and Fontaine, 2020). It does not cover the structural and institutional analysis by considering time and place.

Therefore, there is a scope to bridge the policy design and comparative policy analysis lens to enable a comprehensive and systematic approach. Thus, this study aims to articulate policy design to comparative policy analysis by attempting to propose the analytical framework called 'Comparative Policy Design Analysis' (CPDA) and illustrate the benefit of its implication by using the case of the education policy as this policy sector requires careful policy design.

Among different conceptualisations of policy design, Guy Peters' (2018) perspectives are used in the proposed CPDA framework since his lens comprehensively covers key focuses of policy design. Attuned to his theoretical underpinning, the policy design framework adopted here encompasses problem causation, instrumentation, intervention, and evaluation (Peters, 2018). Causation is when problems are identified, and their solutions are figured out. Instrumentation and intervention are then about selecting policy instruments and placing them in real-world practice. The evaluation strategy reflects on whether the design process is moving in the right direction to address the problems (Peters, 2018).

On the other spectrum, the theoretical points, including the discussion on structure versus agency, the role of context and the problem of time, and policy change, are adapted (Peters and Fontaine, 2020). The discussion on structure versus agency is related to enduring debates between methodological individualism, favouring behavioural and rational choice theories, and neo-institutionalism, arguing for structural determination (Lodge, 2007). The role of context and the time problem are mainly related to the conflicts between and within-case comparative studies.

Thus, the proposed comparative policy design analysis (CPDA) approach is combined with the policy design approach since it would foster universal policy transfer and stimulate contextual considerations of policy adoption.

CPA/ Policy design	Structure and agency	The role of context and the problem of time (Critical times, specific places and governmental levels)	Policy change (Policy transfer, diffusion and learning)
Causations	Policy problems and solutions/ goals determined from structure and agency conditions	Policy problems and solutions/ goals in consideration of times and places/levels	Policy problems and solutions/ goals framed by international experiences
Policy instruments	Instruments aiming to address structure and agency conditions	Instruments chosen from contextual considerations	Instruments chosen by considering international experiences
Policy interventions	Interventions aiming to address structure and agency conditions	Interventions chosen from contextual considerations	Interventions chosen by considering international experiences
Evaluation strategies	Evaluation criteria and methods that are sensitive to structural and institutional changes	Evaluation criteria and methods that are sensitive to Pcontextual changes	Evaluation criteria and methods that are transferred from international standards

Source: Peters (2018) and Peters and Fontaine (2020)

Table 1: CPDA Framework. Developed by authors.

Why the education policies of Finland, Singapore, and Australia?

The education policies of Finland, Singapore, and Australia are chosen for this study as they have a clear way of policy design moving from problems to solutions. Although Finland, Singapore and Australia differ in terms of their historical, geographical, cultural and economic characteristics, they have taken a similar approach to education reforms recently which makes the cases relevant. Those nations are also assessed by the OECD through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking systems which creates similar policy platforms for more focused comparisons (Kauko and Diogo, 2011).

The education policies of Finland, Singapore and Australia are also known for their ability to deliver educational services that have earned a reputation for being dynamic in meeting their local needs while performing well in the global educational rankings. While each country has different policy approaches that are suited for their contexts, those systems do share commonalities that resonate as a progressive policy paradigm to benefit the respective country's socio-economic developments. With their progressive education development, there is a scope to learn from and across them.

Methodology

A qualitative documentary analysis approach is primarily adopted as the main method for this study. The literature comprising of the education policies, acts, rules and regulations and guidelines of Finland, Singapore and Australia spanning over six decades from 1961 to 2022 were gathered mostly from open sources. Predominantly, the documents are extracted from Finland, Singapore and Australia's Ministry of Education's official websites.

The proposed Comparative Policy Design Analysis framework was used for analysis by mapping out a matrix through the adaptation of Guy Peters' policy design and Peters and Fontaine's comparative policy analysis approaches. The vertical considerations included

causations, policy instruments, policy interventions, and evaluation strategies as critical policy design angles. The horizontal considerations covered structure and agency, time and place, policy transfer, diffusion and learning as key angles of comparative policy analysis (Gidden, 1984). The framework considered 12 boxes derived from the convergence of two lenses. In the causation angle, for example, the framework is guided to consider how problems and solutions/ goals are determined from structure and agency conditions, how they are considered in relation to time and place, and how international experiences frame them.

The proposed 'Comparative Policy Design Analysis' (CPDA) framework was thus, used to identify the commonalities and differences in the education policies of Finland, Singapore and Australia.

Findings and Discussions

Commonalities of policy approaches in Finland, Singapore and Australia

For the commonalities identified by the CPDA framework, the success of education from a policy perspective involves a host of factors across the branches of policy actors, stakeholders, and citizens from different policy design angles. Although Finland, Singapore and Australia are different countries in their size, culture, and political and socio-economic contexts, the education policies of those countries share certain commonalities.

The first one is the goal of education built on the design of sound education acts and policies. A system built without a legal and credible stronghold is bound to fail in the planning and execution of policies. Hence, the education policies and acts of Finland, Singapore and Australia have not only guided to steer the educational landscape but also been adaptive to several reforms to suit the emerging national and global interests.

The second common characteristic of the Finnish, Singapore and Australian education systems is an aspiration for the right to high-quality education for the citizens by creating conditions for children to avail rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning programs that address their cognitive, affective, and physical, social, and aesthetic needs, regardless of their background or location.

The third common point between Finland, Singapore and Australia is a complementary approach to supporting education through economy and spending as the main policy instrument. The educational policies cost a significant amount of money on training, financing, and administration, and without some level of economic stability, implementing these policies becomes unfeasible.

The fourth common point between them is the structural integrity of the education system. As governments overhaul their economic strategies in the face of unprecedented challenges which are further exacerbated by technological changes, maintaining a meaningful and relevant education system is required to foster an inclusive and sustainable development of all (OECD, 2019). Although the three countries have vastly different positions on basic education, a large part of the reason these countries can succeed is the internal consistency of their education policies. Finland's education system is based mainly on self-learning and trust in the agents within the system while Singapore believes in a guided approach through rigorous performance management systems. Australia is targeting on internationalisation of

its education by making it one of the crucial components of the economy (Marks, McMillan and Ainley, 2004).

The fifth area of comparison that Finland, Singapore, and Australia have in common is the intervention at the agency level, which is the investment in training their teachers. Aside from having a stringent selection process, these countries engage their teachers in rigorous training schemes and help their trainee teachers to develop classroom competencies through work attachments as well. Aside from that, extensive lessons on pedagogy, which are not commonplace worldwide, are mandatory for prospective teachers. This means that these countries treat teaching as a serious enough profession to have prospective teachers go through courses that pertain specifically to teaching. The talent pool from which teachers are drawn is also quite strong, with almost all teachers coming from the top quarter of academic performers in their cohort. This means that the people supposed to guide students to academic excellence have also achieved it themselves.

The sixth common denominator is the consideration of policy diffusion and learning from the international level, especially the participation in global ranking systems such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which projects them as one of the top educational-performing countries globally (Ustun and Eryilmaz, 2018). The PISA data threw light into the profile of the student's achievements in a way that enabled direct comparison to other PISA participating nations. Disappointing student achievement data has been used as an instigation for education reformations and transformations (ACER, 2016).

Similar to the previous point, the seventh common area where the education policies of Finland, Singapore and Australia meet is a focus on the diffusion and learning of global policy advocacy on the 21st century competency-based learning as an approach with emphasis on the student's demonstration of desired learning outcomes as central to the learning process. It is concerned chiefly with a student's progression through curriculum mastery and skills mastery.

The eighth area of commonalities is the influence of an inclusive policy design perspective, as can be seen from the encouragement to support students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In Australia, the regulatory policies include both language-specific curricula and frameworks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and classical languages. Plurilingualism is a distinctive feature of the Finnish education system, regarded as key to the personal and professional development of individuals and perceived as one of the competitive advantages in students' international performance. A summary of the country's longstanding approach to curriculum design in this field concludes that the official language policy aims at maintaining and cultivating as many foreign languages as possible for individual cultural richness and to increase national linguistic capital. In Singapore, although English is the primary medium of instruction, some schools have programmes for teaching languages to migrant populations (Wong and Turner, 2014).

Differences in policy approaches in Finland, Singapore and Australia

The CPDA framework facilitated the identification of the unique characteristics of each country depending on contextual issues and challenges faced by their education systems as follows:

Equity-based educational policy in Finland

The successes of Finnish education start from the causation angle of policy design that the government makes a very clear educational philosophy that underlines education policy goals.

Promoting equity, equality and the well-being of children is a crucial pillar of education here. The country has one of the narrowest gaps in achievement between its highest and lowest-performing schools, and continuing efforts are being made to reduce differences and inequities between schools. Finnish education is grounded on all-around classroom experience and the development of students into good humans with an equal focus on arts, play and ethics. Finnish schools are founded on promoting the total well-being of children, requiring by law that each school provide free food, access to health care, and on-site counselling and guidance. Every school must have a welfare team to advance child happiness in school, creating a safe, healthy environment conducive to learning. Outdoor, practical learning opportunities and health-related physical activity sessions are regular features (Rajala and Lipponen, 2018).

One of the innovations in Finnish education policy is developing a trust-based system that largely avoids monitoring, testing and inspections, though extensive evaluations occur. Instead, resources are diverted to teaching innovations in Finland. An active Ombudsman for Children represents and consults children and youth councils to advance the cause for children. Since 2016 children are roped into periodical surveys to identify the policy gaps and the results of the study are then incorporated into legislation and decision-making. The Finnish system has remarkable consistency across schools, and there is little variation between students from low and high socio-economic areas (Sahlberg and Hargreaves, 2011). Finland's high equity in education opportunities seems to share a strong link with a reallocation of teaching resources toward weaker students, as well as a diverse curriculum to encourage skill development and personal growth.

Merit-based educational policy in Singapore

Singaporean policy interventions are based mainly on a pragmatic orientation. With such a policy style, the education policies of Singapore are mostly implementable and impactful. The country declared after its independence in 1966 that the goal for education is to rear a generation that has all the qualities needed to lead and inspire the people and the drive to make it succeed. Singapore's philosophy was to build a highly stratified society with shared values. With a changing economic landscape that shifted towards a knowledge-based economy, rapid population growth in the 1980s and immigrant influx since the early 2000s, the policy has changed from stratification to competition. Singapore has a highly structured system of education with a centrally designed curriculum and provision of constant coaching and evaluation of teachers and students. Competition and competency criteria are the basis for career progression in Singapore. Singapore has a streaming system, and now subject matter banding system introduced to reduce the high drop-out rates from the system. These features of the Singaporean model point toward a highly competitive system that showcase the principles of new public management (Tan and Tee Ng, 2007).

Singapore is known for its exemplary education system, but it is equally known for its competitive nature. It can be argued that Singapore has "embraced the goal of achieving new economic competencies dealing with creativity and innovation while clinging to high-stakes

testing as the prime yardstick of meritocracy" (Reyes & Gopinathan, 2015, p. 152). Thus, Singapore has accumulated rich economic and human capital to project it as one of the world's most competitive nations (Garelli, 2007).

Market-based educational policy of Australia

The Australian education system emphasises cultivating a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility from an early age. This includes emphasising discipline, hard work and efficiency in their studies. Buchanan and McPherson (2011) elucidate that the Melbourne Declaration signed in 2008 by Australia's state and federal education ministers is aimed at achieving the goals of equity and excellence with a recurring emphasis on economic, educational, and technological advancements. This infers that that declaration is underpinned by the human capital theory targeted at economic reform and achieving higher productivity and participation in the global knowledge economy. Thus, Australian education policies are designed in consonance with neo-liberalism that shapes the global regime.

Australia has adopted an approach that encourages individuals to get as much out of their experience instead of the pressure and expectation of results the Asian education system tends to value. Hence, several pathway programs to higher education for domestic and international students are offered. Additionally, to prepare appropriately to adjust to the Australian education system, foundation studies and English language preparation programs are offered to international students. There are over 1100 institutions, 22000 courses and 440,129 international students enrolled in the nation's universities and vocational institutions. Notwithstanding a 15% drop from 2021, international education, valued at $18.8 billion, is Australia's third-largest export making it a leading global education provider. Thus, Australia emphasises the economic value of education based on preparing students to be work and future-ready (Australian Government, 2010, 2022).

Conclusion

The proposed Comparative Policy Design Analysis (CPDA) framework showcases the potential for the articulation of the policy design and comparative policy analysis approaches in a singular frame and features their supplementary and complementary roles from specific contexts to across contexts. It can be highlighted that with the adoption of the CPDA framework, we can capture how the principal policy approaches undertaken by Finland, Singapore, and Australia are different by digging deeper into their different designs from different comparative angles. With vertical and horizontal perspectives, they can also make us simplify complex sets of real-world conditions. The articulation of policy design and comparative policy analysis through the CPDA framework is thus productive in helping us explore real-world policy both deeper and wider.

The framework reinforces that each country has different approaches to their ideas of education systems and adopted policies and practices that are suited to its context. Finland considers the child's needs first and then plans its education policies. Its holistic education model has led to remarkable results in child well-being, educational attainment and economic competitiveness that serve its students, communities, and country. Singapore has taken a top-down approach and societal needs into account. Its emphasis on merit-based education with a high focus on command-and-control mechanisms with strategised evaluation and monitoring systems has catapulted the island nation from the third world to the first world status in just over sixty decades. Australia manoeuvres its education policies to suit market trends. Its

educational diversification and pathways programmes and supported by work-right policies have made education an essential component of its economy. The approaches adopted by these countries indicate that there is no one size fits all policy design.

However, moving to the limitations of the implication of the CPDA framework - it is hard to deny that the analysis from a matrix perspective can make us lose the intersections among boxes. For example, policy instruments and interventions are interconnected. Separating them into different boxes reduces our understanding of their connection. Moreover, the analysis of structure and agency, for instance, are not themselves at either the horizontal level or the vertical one. Within their simple classification, there is a risk to neglect something in-between and the interactions between structure and agency. The analysis provides how the education policies of each country are designed to address structural problems and institutional constraints but does not necessarily cover how structural and institutional conditions are interrelated.

There are also caveats that need to be considered regarding generalising this study's findings. Although the analysed articles provide relevant studies and interesting findings from which pertinent conclusions may be drawn, the article has limitations to the understanding of the nuances of policy design's impact on the outcomes of education policies. Notwithstanding these caveats, it is believed that the theoretical framework and the analytical synthesis presented in this article can be used as a starting point for other studies.

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