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# School choice research in five European countries: the circulation of Stephen Ball's concepts and interpretations

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This article analyzes the influence of Stephen Ball's work on research on markets and school choice in five European countries (Finland, France, Norway, Spain, and Sweden). The main focus is on the intellectual circulation of ideas, but the authors also take into account the relationship between ideas and social and political changes, as well as between ideas and the organization of research communities. Concepts derived from policy sociology are used to examine the dissemination of concepts and interpretations. Three areas of study are taken into account (school choice policies, choice as a class strategy, and choice within local education markets). The conclusion points out differences between countries and underlines the need to take into account processes of migration of ideas between national research communities in a more integrated European research area.

**Keywords:** education markets; school choice; educational policy; social class; circulation of ideas

## Introduction :

Over the last three decades, European sociologists and educational researchers have devoted considerable attention to school choice. The purpose of this article is to analyze to what extent and in which directions the work of Stephen Ball has influenced studies in this area. Because of the limited scope of the analysis and its personal focus – rendered even more personal by the long-standing friendship between Stephen Ball and one of the authors – this review essay exhibits some peculiar features. However, we have tried to reduce the limitations engendered by its high degree of contextualization and increase the internal and external validity of conclusions as well as their potential for generalization through a rigorous analysis of the relevant data and the adoption of a theoretically informed perspective.

The empirical analysis is based on a two-step review. We first proceeded with a careful analysis of Ball's work on education markets, with which we were already quite familiar given our own research interests. We paid attention not only to the content of his publications but also to more general characteristics of his research activity, as well as to a more superficial comparison with the work of other UK researchers of markets and school choice, in terms of interest and approaches. For this last dimension, we drew on a recent review study of education markets in the United States and Europe (Felouzis, Maroy, and van Zanten 2013). This first step allowed us to distinguish major research domains and major features of Stephen Ball's research profile whose influence on researchers could be explored. The

second step started with the selection of five countries (France, Finland, Norway, Spain, and Sweden) in which there has been a consistent number of studies devoted to markets and school choice and that show Ball's influence<sup>1</sup> to some extent. We then used policy analysis, review essays, and various types of internet research to collect relevant information on the policy and research contexts in each of these countries. The final and most significant part of this second review step was the collecting of relevant articles that show Ball's influence and their analysis using the major domains of Ball's work on school choice as a grid.

Our theoretical framework draws on our previous analyses of the dynamics and changes of both the sociology and ethnography of education as scientific disciplines (van Zanten 2004, 2011). Relying on some major conclusions of the sociology of science (Gouldner 1973; Merton 1973), we distinguish and combine two modes of analysis of Ball's influence: a focus on the effect of the internal power of ideas, and a focus on the relationship between ideas and social and political changes, as well as between ideas and the organization of research communities. In other words, our framework, while favoring ideas, also considers from a social constructivist perspective (Berger and Luckman 1971) that they are strongly dependent on the policy, social, and research context in which they emerge and are disseminated.

Our theoretical framework also draws on policy sociology (Ozga 1987) and anthropology (Sutton and Levinson 2001), and the main concepts developed by researchers in these areas, including Ball himself, to explain the adoption of similar policy perspectives and tools in different countries, such as 'policy borrowing and lending' (Steiner-Khamsi 2004), 'traveling policies' (Ozga and Jones 2006), 'policy entrepreneurs' (Ball 1998; van Zanten and Ball 2000), and policy 'hybridization' (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Maroy 2008). We consider that the same process extends to research concepts and interpretations. The cross-national transfer of ideas is nothing new. However, in the same way that 'the semantics of globalization promotes de-territorialization and de-contextualization of reform, and challenges the past conception of education as a culturally bounded system' (Steiner-Khamsi 2004, 5), it also promotes the disembeddedness of concepts and methods and their diffusion across national contexts to analyze what are conceived as similar policies or structural processes. The travelling or circulation of research ideas is favored by 'research entrepreneurs' who, similarly to 'policy entrepreneurs' with respect to policy, strive to disseminate specific theoretical and methodological perspectives led by their own convictions and/or by the desire to further their careers and increase their influence. The success of their activity depends nevertheless on their capacity to reshape these perspectives so they can apply to different national settings and mix with dominant national research paradigms in order to make them seem relevant and attractive to other national researchers who will in turn embrace them.

### **Stephen Ball's perspectives on education markets**

Stephen Ball has devoted much of his research career to the study of educational markets and has produced a very significant body of publications on this topic. His interest in the subject dates back to the promulgation of the 1988 Education Reform Act that introduced education markets as a major policy in England; in 1990, he published two articles that referred to the Act and used the term 'markets' (Ball 1990a, 1990b), and in 1991, he started to direct an ESRC-funded study on 'Markets in Secondary Education'. It has been an ongoing and long-lasting interest: between 1990 and 2011, when he finished another ESRC-funded study on 'The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes', for which he is still publishing articles. He has directed or co-directed 12 studies on choice in childcare, primary, secondary, and higher education, and published four books, approximately 50 journal articles, and 20 book chapters related to these studies. Although many other English

researchers have published extensively on choice and educational markets, Stephen Ball is probably the most prolific of them, and the large influence of his ideas is partly due to the impressive amount of research he has conducted and made visible in books and journal articles. It is, however, important to point out that his exceptional record is not only the result of his own individual work but also of his collaborative work with other researchers who are also extremely productive. It is also relevant to underline that his work has been criticized on different grounds, for instance on his tendency to draw large generalizations on the relationship between social class and choice from small localized samples of families and by relying on what could be perceived as overlapping and unclear concepts and categories (Tooley 1997).

The influence of Stephen Ball's research is also, and more importantly, due to its distinctive features. As is the case for other well-known social science researchers, these features result from a specific mix of personal taste and professional skills concerning methods of inquiry, and intellectual interest and political concern for certain topics. As he notes himself in the short introduction to a selection of his publications on policy and social class (Ball 2006a), Ball's approach is both ethnographic, that is anchored in fieldwork, mindful of nuances in personal dispositions, institutional processes and social effects, and resolutely theory-driven, an uncommon although not exceptional combination. This combination is rendered more distinctive by the fact that though his approach has integrated over the years the perspectives and conclusions of many other researchers, starting with those of his close collaborators, his theoretical perspective is characterized by the influence of two famous French social scientists, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

Developing an innovative approach to educational phenomena based on the work of these two authors is coherent, as they share a common quest for new modes of theorizing and interpreting the social foundations of individual action that are distinct from the phenomenological approaches dominant at the beginning of their career, but at the same time avoid a strict determinist approach. It is nevertheless quite challenging, as each author has developed a unique perspective on central issues of power and individual intentionality (Garcia 2002). Ball's does so in many ways that cannot be examined in detail in this article. It is however interesting to underline that the weight of these two major influences also varies depending on the topic: his approach of school choice is more informed by Bourdieu than by Foucault, especially because of his interest in the relationship between class and choice, while the opposite is the case for his work on teachers and school micropolitics, where he has focused more on issues of performativity and governmentality.

Class is indeed a central dimension in Stephen Ball's approach to school choice. The focus on social class is not exceptional in the UK context and is shared both by Ball's close collaborators and other researchers on school choice. The distinctiveness of Stephen Ball's work in this respect lies first in his reference to Bourdieu's work. This has led him to emphasize, for instance in his well-known typology of choosers (privileged/skilled, semi-skilled and disconnected) (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996), the role of the cultural capital necessary to encode and decode knowledge of schools, as well as to make judgments and enact decisions in educational markets. The influence of Bourdieu's views on *habitus* and practice also has led him to point out that parents' and students' views and actions concerning choice combine rational strategies and more intuitive forms of apprehension of and engagement with schools that are strongly dependent on class-based tastes and norms (Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Another specific feature of his work is the dual emphasis on reproduction and social closure, and more precisely on how the middle classes use choice to reproduce their advantages and close off opportunities to the groups below. Still other

distinctive features of his class perspective are the focus on the value dilemmas and the risks and fears involved in the process of choosing for different social class groups (Ball 2003).

Another salient dimension of Ball's research on school choice is his focus on policy. This again is not exceptional among British researchers who tend to view parental choice as the direct consequence of educational reforms starting with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Ball's approach is nevertheless distinct from that of his colleagues in at least two ways. The first is his emphasis on educational markets as a major instrument for the 'privatization' of educational systems through the introduction of funding but also of organizational arrangements, managerial practices, and general principles from the private sector (Ball 2007). The second is his focus on policy processes and long-term qualitative effects rather than on quantitative measurable impacts. One central idea to this dimension is that market reforms have not only changed the organizational environment of local educational actors, but also their moral environment, creating ethical uncertainties and dilemmas for headteachers, teachers and parents (van Zanten and Ball 1998; Ball 2006b).

A third important dimension of Stephen Ball's work is his emphasis on choice as embedded in local and institutional contexts. The focus on local processes is not in itself specific to his work. Indeed, other British researchers have studied in more detail the internal dynamics of local markets. What is distinctive in Ball's research is the attention that he gives to the interplay between class and locality. Drawing inspiration from the work of urban sociologists and geographers interested in class (Butler and Robson 2003), Stephen Ball's school choice studies, especially the one on childcare (Ball and Vincent 2007), carefully examine differences between local class fractions and how class and place intervene in parental choices. Another important local dimension concerns local parental networks and the way in which they influence access to inside knowledge about the schools, parental preferences and judgments (Ball and Vincent 1998). Stephen Ball has also written about the interaction between social class groups and types of schools giving way to distinct 'circuits of schooling' inside the same local space (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995), as well as about the interaction between headteachers and teachers' engagement in local educational markets and parental strategies (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995).

### **The influence of Ball's work on education markets in other national contexts**

To what extent has Ball's approach influenced research on markets and school choice in other national contexts? Space limitations do not allow us to show in detail how certain concepts have been recontextualized (Bernstein 1996) in different research studies and publications. Rather, we will focus more superficially on how Ball's major themes on school choice have been introduced in different national contexts by various researchers. While it may lack in depth, this analysis documents which of his ideas seem to have 'traveled' best. It also provides some leads about the type of factors that encourage or limit the circulation of ideas.

### ***Choice, markets, and neoliberal policies***

Although Ball's research on educational policy is well known and highly appreciated outside England, his writings on policies concerning educational markets do not seem to have significantly influenced research in this area in other countries. In the Nordic countries, where his influence in this area seems to be the greatest, Ball's main contribution to research on choice policies has been his provision of theoretical tools for understanding new phenomena after the 'neoliberal turn', or, as Arreman and Holm (2011) put it regarding Sweden, that of

a market-oriented policy language to inform discussion on choice. Ball's work (1998, 2006b, 2007) has been perceived as having developed relevant conceptualizations for understanding policy discourse and patterns of public sector restructuring (Arreman and Holm 2011), for making interconnections with similar changes and their consequences in other countries (Kallstenius 2007, for Sweden; Seppänen 2006, for Finland), and for analyzing policy discourse in local educational frameworks (Lund 2008; Rajander 2010).

The first Spanish studies on school choice, published in 2004 and 2005, document changes in the student composition and the role of private schools at the national level as well as the emergence of micromarkets at the local level, which are attributed more to institutional and social changes than to policy directives and do not refer, or do only marginally, to studies conducted outside Spain. Later studies evoke the existence of choice policies and cite some of Ball's publications. However, their authors (Fernández Esquina 2004; Alegre, Benito, and González 2008; Valiente 2008; Villarroja and Escardíbul 2008) do not use Ball's research to inform their interpretation schemes but rather to legitimate the idea that, following global trends or under global pressures, the Spanish national or regional governments have developed choice policies and have encouraged parents to act as consumers without publicizing these orientations. The only exception is Olmedo (2008a, 2008b) who employs the concept of 'magical policies' (Ball 1993) to designate school choice policies in Spain. It was only after Stephen Ball's new research on privatization had started to become well-known, that some of his policy concepts, and especially his dual typology of 'endogenous' and 'exogenous' forms of privatization, started to be used by several researchers to integrate school choice policies under the wider umbrella of privatization policies through which dominant groups try to alter existing rules of exclusion to maintain their advantages and their power (Olmedo and Santa Cruz 2010; Alegre and Benito 2012; Bernal and Lacruz 2013).

In France, the first research studies on choice policies did not refer in any way to the UK experience or to global market trends despite Ballion's (1982) introduction of the idea of parental 'consumerism.' One of the first articles to make the connection to Ball's work and other British publications was written by van Zanten (2000), although van Zanten wrote from a critical viewpoint, underlining the need to take into account significant differences between countries and the gap between policy discourses and local processes. Ball's publications relating to his first study on educational markets and social class were also mentioned, although not extensively discussed, in a synthesis research report on policies of autonomy and choice written by Meuret, Broccolichi, and Duru-Bellat (2001), and also by Laval and colleagues in various publications denouncing the impact of neoliberalism (Laval 2003; Laval et al. 2011). The few researchers who have analyzed the local enactment of choice policies have not referred to Ball's work, with the partial exception of Barrault (2013), who focused on 'accommodative' forms of local governance. However, van Zanten, in an article written with Ball (Ball and van Zanten 1998) and in her own studies of school choice (2001, 2009c), has studied how the underlying principles of choice policies affect the values and actions of local actors.

### ***Choice as a class strategy***

In the countries considered, Ball's research on school choice has been most influential concerning the class dimension of parental strategies. This, however, is not so much the case in France even if the great majority of studies of school choice take into account variations across social groups. This is partially due to the fact that many of these studies, especially statistical ones, are interested in inequalities and segregation and not in the positions of

different groups in social space or their internal logics of action, which leads them to use national administrative categories and refer to a 'thin' concept of class. The only exception is the work by Felouzis and Perroton (2007) who, having used mixed methods to analyze the effects of school markets, do cite one or two of Ball's references.

Studies that resort to a 'thicker' concept of social class do not, however, necessarily refer extensively to Ball's work for two main reasons. The first is that the few existing studies on the educational practices of social class groups have focused on the working class and pay little attention to school choice. The second is that even those that explore parental school preferences take their inspiration directly from Bourdieu's writings without using Ball's analysis as a useful extension of Bourdieu's work. The sole exception is the work of van Zanten who draws on Ball's studies, as well as on those of other British and American researchers, to study the conflicting aims, value dilemmas and cognitive perspectives of different middle-class fractions and how they influence the matching of children and schools (van Zanten 2003, 2007; Raveaud and van Zanten 2007), as well as how middle-class parents use their economic, cultural, and social capital to prepare, enact, and follow-up with school choices (van Zanten 2006a, 2013). Philippe Gombert, who prepared his PhD under van Zanten's supervision, has also used Ball's analyses of the *habitus*es of different middle-class fractions to analyze the urban and educational practices of private-sector managers and professionals (Gombert and van Zanten 2004; Gombert 2008).

Spanish researchers, on the other hand, have been quite receptive to Ball's analysis on choice and social class. One of the first to conduct a study of school choice focusing on social differences was Xavier Rambla, who also wrote a review essay on this topic (Rambla 2003) in which he discusses Ball's work alongside that of other British and American authors. In later publications, he again cites Ball's research to point out the contrast between middle-class parents, who have internalized pro-market discourses and resort to strategic reasoning, and working-class parents, who exhibit fatalistic attitudes and for whom school choice is tied to painful personal school experiences. Rambla also evokes the impact of choice policies on family dynamics and on women's domestic labor (Rambla 2006a; Rambla, Valiente, and Frías 2011). Ball's perspective on choice and social class has also influenced the work of Miguel Angel Alegre, especially his typology of choosers (Alegre et al. 2010; Alegre and Benito 2012) and his analysis of choice as a playing field where middle-class families can use their capital and 'family styles' to their advantage. Ball's influence is particularly visible in the work of Olmedo (2008a, 2008b; Olmedo and Santa Cruz 2008, 2011), who uses Ball's work extensively to examine how middle-class parents use and reconvert their various resources to maintain the positional advantage of their children and places great emphasis on the fact that choice is not only guided by rational instrumental calculation but by values, intuitions and expressive concerns.

In the Nordic countries, the first publications to focus on school choice and social class were those by Piia Seppänen (Hirvenoja 2000; Seppänen 2003a, 2003b, 2006), who introduced Ball's work on school choice to the Finnish audience. In her analysis, Seppänen emphasizes both the connection between the educational background of the mother and school choices and the use of choice as a class strategy that produces and reproduces differentiation and inequalities, and introduces the idea of parentocracy, borrowed by Ball from Brown (2000) and later adopted by Rajander (2010). After Seppänen's pioneering work, Seppänen, Rinne, and Sairanen (2012), Poikolainen (2012), Kosunen (2012a) and Koivuhovi (2012) also developed similar perspectives. Bunar (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) introduced Ball's work to Sweden, focusing mainly on the study of choice as an active process of social reproduction for middle-class parents in urban multicultural contexts. Kallstenius



(2007) also drew on Ball's work to point out that freedom of choice has contributed to the changing nature of social segregation in Swedish cities.

In Norway, researchers have also used Ball's articles to examine social segregation in schools (Helland and Lauglo 2007) and the social reproduction strategies of families belonging to different middle-class fractions (Stefansen 2007; Stefansen and Farstad 2010). Stefansen and Aarseth (2011) have developed Ball's analyses of 'making up the middle-class child' with the concept of 'enriching intimacy.' They have used it to describe the way in which middle-class mothers combine learning and enjoyment in their educational practices while distinguishing themselves from other families with the cultural breadth that these activities bring to their children. In all three countries, several authors (Seppänen 2006; Stefansen 2007; Lund 2008; Kosunen 2012a; Poikolainen 2012) have also used Ball to further develop Bourdieu's concept of education as a field where individuals located at different points of the social space and possessing unequal resources are competing to improve their position.

### ***Choice in institutional and local contexts***

Spanish researchers have not devoted a lot of attention to market dynamics at the local level, although most of the studies considered here are local ethnographic studies, and those that focus on this dimension do not necessarily refer to Ball's work. In several of his articles, Olmedo refers to local educational markets but does not study them in detail. It is Alegre (Alegre et al. 2010; Alegre and Benito 2012) who has gone further in establishing a parallel between the fields of school choice (defined in terms of socio-economic and urban structures, school networks and ideological and political frameworks) in Barcelona, London, and Paris using Ball and van Zanten's work. Olmedo and Santa Cruz's work (2011) is also concerned with the process of the 'social decoding' of schools, which is influenced by parents' social position, local networks and institutional environment. Rambla (2003) and Alegre et al. (2010), on the other hand, examine in more detail the importance of the 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) about schools that circulates in parental networks. Alegre also refers to the analyses presented in Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) to underline how middle-class parents benefit from their capacity to engage in interactions with school representatives in order to inform their school choices.

In France, researchers who have studied market dynamics at the local level over the last ten years tend to include at least one or two references to Ball's research in their bibliographies. Such is the case of Oberti (2007), who as an urban sociologist brings an urban perspective to the analysis of school choice, and also of François and Poupeau (2008). These two authors, one a geographer and the other a sociologist, refer to Ball and colleagues' notion of 'circuits of schooling,' already used with a similar purpose by Broccolichi and van Zanten (1997, 2000), to describe and interpret the interaction between certain types of families and certain types of schools. In her work on 'competitive interdependencies' between schools in different local spaces in European cities (van Zanten 2009a) and in related publications with Delvaux and van Zanten (2006) and Maroy and van Zanten (2007), van Zanten also used the concepts of 'first-order' and 'second-order' competition developed in Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) and drew inspiration from that study and other Ball publications for her analysis of the external and internal strategies of school agents working under competitive pressures. She has also written extensively on the role of local personal and professional networks in the circulation of information, the construction of judgments and the enactment of school choices (van Zanten 2009b, 2009c, 2013).

In the Finnish context, Ball's analysis of the ways in which parents retrieve 'hot knowledge' from the grapevine has also been adopted (Kosunen 2012b; Kosunen and



Carrasco, and Tironi 2012). However, Nordic researchers have not to date borrowed Ball's research concepts and tools as such concerning the functioning of local markets. As pointed out by both Seppänen (2006) and Lund (2008), this is probably due to differences in provision in public and private education between the Nordic countries and the UK and to less market-oriented attitudes among parents, professionals and decision-makers.

### **Processes involved in the circulation of Ball's ideas on school choice**

Although we have already suggested some processes that may have influenced the extent to which Ball's work was disseminated in the national contexts considered, as well as the types of topics and ideas adopted by various researchers in these contexts, it is useful to consider them in a more systematic way. We will do so by focusing, first, on the influence of policy and social contexts on the borrowing process and, second, on the impact of research contexts on the circulation and adoption of Ball's ideas.

#### ***Policy and social contexts and the borrowing process***

Even without direct external pressures on research agendas, changes in policy and social contexts play a significant role in the emergence of new topics in the social sciences, which are by design highly contextualized (Passeron 1991; van Zanten 2006b). We have already pointed out that Stephen Ball's and other British researchers' interest in school choice is the direct consequence of the introduction of market policies in the UK. It is therefore not surprising to observe that the introduction of policies affecting school choice in the different countries examined here explains to some extent why Ball's ideas have been borrowed. It is, however, important to underline that these policy decisions have lacked the coherence of British reforms and have not in general been legitimized within a common neoliberal discourse. They are in fact piecemeal attempts to respond to internal pressures, different in each country and region, and to incorporate global trends with a wide array of justifications (van Zanten 2005).

In the Nordic countries, the model still dominant in the 1980s and supported by a socio-democratic ideology stressing equality and the social and cultural integration of students from all backgrounds was that of the comprehensive school (Antikainen 2006; Koritzinsky 2001). Important decentralization reforms were nevertheless introduced in the 1990s that increased the power of local decision-makers (Simola, Rinne, and Kivirauma 2002; Lindblad et al. 2002), parental choice possibilities (e.g. Lidström 1999) and competition between schools. More possibilities for setting up private schools were also provided in some countries. Sweden appears as a trendsetter with respect to these changes: choice was introduced quite early in the country's policy agenda (Lidström 1999) and it now has a high percentage (around 20%) of students in independent schools, which are part of the State sector but are for the most part run by for profit business. The interest in Ball's work in these countries is thus very much linked to its capacity to provide a coherent conceptual framework for understanding these policy changes, although they have not always been justified with neoliberal discourses. However, as pointed out in the previous section, some researchers have also drawn on Ball's work to explore more subtle social changes in parents' expectations and practices simultaneously with policy changes (Seppänen 2003b, 2006).

The French and the Spanish situations are different than that of the Nordic countries and quite similar to each other, although changes have taken place earlier and been more significant in France. In trying to construct a unified educational system in the 1970s and 1980s, both countries were forced to take into account the presence of a large group of

private Catholic schools and chose to generously fund a significant proportion of them. This decision allowed for the development of a stronger system of private schools that have more leeway than public schools in selecting students and providing appropriate responses to parental demands. Meanwhile, due to the increased segregation of lower-class and immigrant students in some public urban schools and widening inequalities within the public sector, its image started to deteriorate, creating a fertile ground for the development of new patterns of parental choice of private schools (Ballion 1980; Fernández Enguita 2005; Villaroya and Escardíbul 2008; van Zanten 2009c). These dynamics, coupled with more general decentralization reforms, encouraged the creation of new possibilities for choice within the public sector with some possibilities for local experimentation by the national government in France and by regional governments and autonomous communities in Spain. In other words, as pointed out by Bonal (2000) in the case of Spain, decisions concerning school choice as well as other educational decisions have been taken more in reaction to internal pressures than as part of a coherent political project. This explains to a large extent why researchers in these two countries, with some exceptions in Spain (Bernal and Lacruz 2013; Olmedo 2013), have been less attracted to Ball's writings on school choice policies than to his contribution to the analysis of the relationship between class and choice in local educational markets.

### ***Research contexts and the circulation and incorporation of Ball's analyses***

In order to understand how research ideas circulate, it is also crucial to take into account communication patterns between researchers and the impact of research contexts. Publications play an essential role in the circulation of ideas among research communities (Schriewer and Keiner 1992). However, although Stephen Ball's articles and books are easily accessible at university libraries and on the Internet, and many researchers are fluent enough in English to read and understand them, they are not used to the same extent everywhere. For instance, a comparison of references to Ball's work in the articles examined in the previous section show a much higher number of publications cited in the Finnish articles than in Swedish and Norwegian articles. Translations in other languages are also important for generating a wider readership and for favoring the integration of foreign ideas into national research landscapes. Stephen Ball has written several articles and book chapters in the languages of the countries under consideration. On the topic of choice and competition, there seems to be roughly the same number of articles in French (3) and Spanish (3) and none in Finnish. However, Ball's publications on policy, which often discuss education markets, are much more numerous in Spanish (7) than in Finnish (2) and French. This may partially explain Stephen Ball's large influence on research on markets in Spain. To this, it must be added that Stephen Ball has been for a long time the co-editor of a major international educational journal, *The Journal of Education Policy* that has played and still plays a key role in the circulation and adoption of his ideas and of those of authors inspired by his work.

The impact of publications is frequently reinforced by presentations at conferences. Stephen Ball gave the keynote speeches at conferences of the Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA) in 2007, the European Sociological Association in 2007, and the European Conference of Educational Research (ECER) in 2009, even though their main topic was not school choice.<sup>2</sup> However, the degree of participation at these conferences of the researchers from the different countries considered here is quite different. In addition to the fact that Nordic researchers meet annually at NERA conferences, they are also very well represented at ECER annual conferences. Participants from Sweden, Finland, and Norway represented 21% of the European participants at the ECER in 2011 and 2012, while Spanish

participants represented only 8% in 2011 and 14% in 2012, and French participants a mere 2% in 2011 and 2012.<sup>3</sup> National conferences and visits are also important. Although Stephen Ball's updated *curriculum vitae* does not provide exhaustive information on this aspect of his research activities, analysis of it and other personal information shows that he has presented his research in several Nordic countries, specifically Finland, where he was elected Professor *Honoris Causa* at the University of Turku in 2003. He has also participated in at least four conferences and seminars in France, but he seems to have visited more frequently and spent more time in Spain, particularly in Barcelona. Thus, international and national conferences seem to have contributed to a wider dissemination of Stephen Ball's research in the Nordic countries and in Spain than in France.

Because of his strong involvement in the dissemination of his work in England and, more markedly, abroad, Stephen Ball can be considered as a good example of a 'research entrepreneur'. The effectiveness of his own activity as such is in turn reinforced by the presence of national researchers who participate, through their own publications and the aforementioned activities, in the dissemination of his ideas in their home country. Their joint action can be studied as that of an 'advocacy coalition' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) in favour of a specific theoretical and methodological perspective on school choice. The collective character of this endeavour is more visible in Spain where several of the researchers previously cited have significantly contributed to popularizing Ball's work through invitation to conferences, translations and their own work. Their action is moreover reinforced by that of many other researchers from Spanish-speaking South American countries who have ties with Stephen Ball and have strongly contributed to his significant influence on school choice research in that region. In the other countries considered here, such networks do not exist but individual researchers have played a significant role in the dissemination of Ball's ideas on school choice. This is the case for Piia Seppänen in Finland and Nihad Bunar in Sweden as well as for Agnès van Zanten in France.

The most complex question concerning the circulation of ideas, however, is that of assessing the effects of other more long-lasting factors related to the dynamics of research communities and the characteristics of the type of research conducted. A serious analysis of this question is out of the scope of this paper, but some hypothesis can be proposed. For instance, it seems likely that the influence of Ball's ideas in Spain might be linked to the recent and still limited development of social science research in this country, due to both the weak support of research and higher education during the four decades of Francoist regime and, more recently, to a lack of funding. This has encouraged Spanish researchers to be strongly receptive to international influences (Rambla 2006b). In France, on the contrary, a relatively high level of development of social science research after World War II (Chapoulie 1991) has contributed to a strong perception of 'cultural distinctiveness,' which, coupled with the desire to preserve the worldwide influence of the French language, has led to a strong national orientation and to the development of privileged links with other European francophone research communities in Belgium and Switzerland. The Nordic countries are found somewhere 'in between,' as they are characterized by a high level of development of national research communities while remaining, for historical and linguistic reasons, quite open to international, and especially Anglophone, influences.

## Conclusion

This brief and tentative analysis shows that Stephen Ball's research on school choice has influenced studies on the same topic in other European countries. Lack of space did not permit us to present a detailed analysis of the forms of influence, which range from simple

citations in bibliographies to a strong borrowing in the text, from verbatim quotes to elaborate forms of recontextualization and hybridization with other ideas. However, in many publications, this influence appears quite strong with respect both to awareness of new topics, questions and approaches, and to the provision of relevant concepts, fertile research leads and thought-provoking interpretations.

Although it is difficult to generalize from this specific case, we believe it provides some leads for further studies on processes of migration and dissemination of ideas between national research communities. One dimension pointed out in this study that deserves further attention concerns the type of theories that seem to travel best. The universal pretention of 'grand' theories makes them the best candidates for global circulation, and it seems logical to assume that part of the success of Stephen Ball's ideas is linked to the way in which he has managed to integrate central theoretical constructions and perspectives from the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, as well as from other major sociologists. However, the appeal of his work is also probably due to the fact that he has created new bridges between these 'grand' theories and more contextual research in sociology and education thus providing a 'middle-range' theory for researchers unfamiliar with the work of these authors or hesitant to borrow and recontextualize them themselves.

Another dimension that it also seems important to explore further concerns the relationship between policy and research. Most of the research in this area has focused up to now on the way in which policies have incorporated research knowledge and used it to devise new knowledge-based regulation tools (van Zanten 2009d; Grek and Ozga 2010). Another way to conceive this relationship explored in this article is to link the success of certain research themes to their relation to policy. If Stephen Ball research on school choice has been taken up by researchers in the five countries considered here, it is also due to the fact that this topic came to occupy a significant position in the agenda of many national policymakers in the last 30 years and also to the fact that in many countries it introduced major changes with respect to former policy orientations. This meant that on-going national research orientations were perceived in many cases as inadequate to interpret the new dynamics and effects generated by school choice policies and that encouraged researchers in turn to look up for new models of analysis abroad. The work of English researchers has frequently been perceived as one of the most significant given both the precocity and importance of school choice policies in England and the amount of studies conducted on them.

To conclude, it also seems important to underline the need to explore in more detail the role of 'research entrepreneurs' and 'advocacy coalitions' of researchers in the success of certain research theories and paradigms. Although under stronger pressures from government, universities and research institutions, researchers are presently uniformly encouraged to publish widely in international journals and make their work available in different forms to internal audiences, there are still differences between them in the degree of internationalization of their work. These differences are linked to the intrinsic quality of their work but also to their willingness to get involved in dissemination activities on an entrepreneurial mode. In addition to that, the global success of certain theories and research studies also seems linked to the activity of individual researchers and networks of researchers who, for reasons that deserve further analysis, participate in their home country or in given geographical and/or linguistic areas in the dissemination of the work of researchers whom they consider as having brought major contributions to research in various disciplines and domains of study.

## Notes

1. We also initially considered including Denmark, but left it aside because no significant influence of Ball's work on school choice was found. Iceland was also left out because the amount of school choice research is small. The cases of Belgium and the Netherlands were also partly analysed but were again excluded, both because Ball's influence was small and because the field covered would have been too large for a qualitative analysis in a journal article. We thank Antonio Olmedo for helping us find a relevant set of articles on school choice in Spain.
2. At ECER, the theme was the privatisation of education policy.
3. The great leap in the figures concerning Spain is largely due to the fact that the 2012 conference took place at Cadiz. We thank Leif Moos and David Bosold of ECER for sharing these figures.

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