
Beyond the standardisation vs. contextualisation debate: the role of the OECD in European education governance

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Introduction

Alongside other international organizations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has become part and parcel of the internationalizing, globalising and thus converging policy processes that have been commented on by many scholars in relation to education (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry 1997; Ozga and Lingard 2007). While it is primarily concerned with economic policy, education has taken on increasing importance within that mandate, as it has been reframed as central to national economic competitiveness within an economic human capital framework and linked to an emerging 'knowledge economy'.

Founded in 1961, the OECD has taken on an enhanced role as a policy actor, as it seeks a niche in the post Cold War globalising world in relation to other international organisations (IOs) and supranational agencies (Rinne et al. 2004; Henry et al. 2001). To this end, it has developed alliances with other IOs such as UNESCO, the European Union (EU), and the World Bank to actively promote its policy preferences. The case of the OECD is particularly interesting because, unlike the EU, it does not have the legal instruments, nor the financial levers to actively promote policy making at the national level within member nations. This also contrasts with the World Bank, for example, which has 'power' over nations of the Global South through policy requirements or trade-offs (structural adjustment) linked to funding and loans. Nonetheless, through ranking exercises such as the 'Education at a Glance' annual reports, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), its Indicators in Education project, including the World Education Indicators developed in conjunction with UNESCO and the World Bank, through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and through national and thematic policy reviews, its educational agenda has become significant in framing policy options not only at the national but also in the constitution of a European and -perhaps- global policy space in education (Lingard and Grek 2007; Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor 2005).

This paper will not examine the full assemblage of the OECD education data production machine; instead it will focus on the Indicators in Education (INES) project, on PISA and on the 'Reviews of National Policies for Education', in an attempt to show that OECD's both quantitative and qualitative work are mutually reinforcing and dependent. PISA is the major OECD international assessment; it takes place every three years and assesses 15 year olds' literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills across the world, irrespective of school curricula; it has been the international standardising assessment *par excellence* and simultaneously highly praised and highly criticised for its decontextualized tests. As a result, PISA has instigated a new era in education governance across the world, primarily through its construction of a commensurable global education space that did not exist before; given its vast policy implications for education systems worldwide, it is widely accepted as the golden standard by both the policy and the research worlds. However, the paper will show that the OECD standardisation juggernaut is only possible through a great amount of local, national, face-to-face and deeply-contextual work, in order to maintain the reputation of the global knowledge producer and mediator – perhaps more crucially, in order to sustain its role as *critical friend*. Familiarity here is key, and so is the attention to local political battles and disputes. It is precisely OECD's ability to work directly and closely with member states that has allowed it to secure the brand of the unequivocal education policy player – an ability that the European Commission has never had.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of some of the sensitizing concepts that frame the research; it then moves on to present a short history of the educational work of the OECD, with a particular focus on its education indicators and PISA projects, as well as its Reviews of National Policies for Education. It discusses the case of the Scottish review as a case in point and finishes off with a discussion of the main findings and conclusions.

Theoretical approach and background

In theoretical terms, adopting a perspective that builds on sociological institutionalism, IOs are understood as not simply structure, or ‘mere epiphenomena’ of impersonal policy machinery (Barnett and Finnemore 1999) but rather as purposive actors who, ‘armed with a notion of progress, an idea of how to create a better life, and some understanding of the conversion process’, have become the ‘missionaries of our time’ (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; 712). This raises the question -what has transformed the OECD to one of the most powerful agents of transnational education governance? Martens (2007) has contributed substantially to this discussion suggesting that the ‘comparative turn’ –‘a scientific approach to political decision making’ (2007; 42) – has been the main driver of OECD success. Through its statistics, reports and studies, it has achieved a brand which most regard indisputable; OECD’s policy recommendations are accepted as valid by politicians and scholars alike, ‘without the author seeing any need beyond the label “OECD” to justify the authoritative character of the knowledge contained therein’ (Porter and Webb, 2004).

Drawing on Marten’s (2007) ideas, we can see that there is a taken-for grantedness about education indicators, despite all the commentary asking for contextualisation in their interpretation (e.g. Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003), and this is indicative of the way in which they have become an accepted part of the contemporary educational policy lexicon across the globe, within and well beyond the OECD, and of their growing significance to the work of the OECD itself since the 1980s. PISA now accounts for approximately 30 per cent of the Education Directorate’s budget inside the OECD and is funded directly by participating nations. One could suggest that the OECD’s greatest impact has been in relation to its Indicators agenda, including PISA, and its role in constructing a global educational policy field through governance by comparison (Martens 2007). Indeed, as Antonio Nóvoa argued, ‘comparing must not be seen as a method, but as a policy...the expert discourse builds its proposals through “comparative” strategies that tend to impose “naturally” similar answers in the different national settings’ (2002; 144).

Therefore, in its role as policy actor, the OECD has created a niche as a technically highly competent agency for the development of educational indicators and comparative educational performance measures. OECD-defined and collected data on education systems in Europe are then intersected with EU data, contributing to the creation of a governable space of comparison and commensurability —the European education space (Nóvoa and Lawn 2002) Indeed, a number of histories of statistics demonstrate the intimate and interwoven relationships between the development of state administrative structures and processes of standardization and comparison (Hacking 1975, 1990; Porter 1995; Desrosières 1998). The nation constituted as a ‘space of equivalence’ is necessary to the construction of statistics (Desrosières 1998), but statistics and numbers which elide the local are equally important to the construction, in this case, of a commensurable education policy field. These developments reflect policy convergence around what Brown and his colleagues define as a new educational policy consensus:

‘The new consensus is based on the idea that as the ‘walled’ economies in mid-century have given way to an increasingly global economy, the power of national government to control the outcome of economic competition has been weakened... Indeed the competitive advantage of nations is frequently redefined in terms of the quality of national education and training systems judged according to international standards’ (Brown et al. 1997, pp.7-8).

Policy instruments such as indicators and the whole audit and performance-monitoring nexus have become a significant element of the shift from government to the governance of national education systems through new institutional forms with the purpose:

of orienting relations between political society (via the administrative executive) and civil society (via its administered subjects) through intermediaries in the form of devices that mix technical components (measuring, calculating the rule of law, procedure) and social components (representation, symbol) (Lascombes and Le Galès 2007, p.6).

The OECD: history, structure and changing functions

What then is the OECD, how does it function, what are its purposes, and where does education policy fit within its remit? Henry et al. (2001, p.1) note that the OECD has been described as a think tank, a geographic entity, an organizational structure, a policy-making forum, a network of policy makers, researchers and consultants, and a sphere of influence. In formal terms, the OECD describes itself as:

...a club of like-minded countries. It is rich, in that OECD countries produce two thirds of the world's goods and services, but it is not an exclusive club. Essentially, membership is limited only by a country's commitment to a market economy and a pluralistic democracy. (OECD 1997)

In the post Cold war era, of course, many more nations meet these two membership criteria. At the same time, the contexts of globalization and end of the Cold War have provoked questions for the OECD itself about its specific role. How does it fit with, complement, define itself in relation to other international intergovernmental agencies from the supranational EU to the UN, UNESCO and through to the World Bank and WTO?

The significance of these identity and function pressures becomes apparent when one considers the origins of the Organization. The OECD was formally established in 1961 and evolved from the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), funded under the Marshall Plan by the USA for the economic reconstruction of Europe in the context of the Cold War. An economic focus has always been paramount with education considered in relation to the economy. Papadopoulos (1994) in his institutional history of the OECD and education states that education always had an 'inferred role' in respect of its economic significance. As will be shown, this inferred role has become more explicit in the context of post Cold war globalization and emergent knowledge economy. The end of the Cold War and the apparent triumph of global capitalism has placed pressures on the purposes of the OECD and changed its remit in some ways.

The OECD itself argues that operates through 'consensus building' and through 'peer pressure' and as Lukes' (2005) account of power has suggested, hegemony is more effective than naked force. It is proud of the 'traditions of transparency: of providing explanations and justifications for policy, and of engaging in critical self-appraisal' (OECD 1998a, p. 102). As Henry et al. (2001) note, 'its cachet is linked to its elevation above the machinations of national politics' (p.160). The OECD hence seeks to exert influence through processes of 'mutual examination by governments, multilateral surveillance and peer pressure to conform or reform'. This is achieved through an elaborate system of directorates, committees and boards, at the apex of which is a Council comprising representatives from each member country, normally at ambassadorial or ministerial levels. In this way, the OECD asserts its agenda in rather informal ways through the processes of opinion formation and coordination, in a manner that is dynamic and constantly shifting.

In arguing this case, Rizvi and Lingard (2006) are drawing on earlier research conducted with Miriam Henry and Sandra Taylor (Henry et al., 2001), where the argument was sustained that, while the OECD remains a think-tank, a policy-making forum, a network of policy makers, researchers and consultants, and a sphere of influence functioning through suasion, it has now become more of a policy actor in its own right. That study was explicitly concerned to ascertain how the OECD had articulated, responded to and been affected by the

processes of globalization (Henry et al., 2001, p.157). Yet, as Henry et al. (2001, p.174) suggest, 'The OECD is not a singular entity'. They add: 'Rather, it exists in a complex relationship with its members being simultaneously policy instrument, forum and actor'. However, it is the role as policy actor which has strengthened over the recent past, in the context of globalization, and been a central factor in the new scalar politics, which have seen the emergence of a global economic policy field and new forms of governance. Further, its policy reach has extended beyond its member nations through its work with 'non-member economies' and its contribution to global economic policy discourses, which frame educational policy in explicit human capital ways. The OECD's Directorate for Education, for example, has a Unit for Co-operation with Non-member Economies (NME).

The OECD's educational work

To this point we have noted that the OECD is an organization concerned primarily with economic policy. Historically, the OECD's interest in education has been clearly linked to its overall economic objectives. It was only in 2002 that Education became a separate and permanent Directorate within the OECD; until then it had less certain institutional status, gaining a mandate every five years from the Council of the Organisation. In its original charter there was no independent structural location for education, only the inferred role noted earlier (Papadopoulos 1994, p.11). Initially, this inferred role was conceived in terms of boosting scientific and technological personnel capacity and improving and expanding science and mathematics education in school (in the context of the space race and Cold War). Education-related activities were carried out initially under the rubric of the Office for Scientific and Technical Personnel, which in turn grew out of the former OEEC's pivotal work in mapping the technological gap between Europe and North America in the context of the Cold War (Papadopoulos 1994). There is again now in the OECD's work a focus on these capacities, but in a post Cold War world and in relation to the knowledge economy, with knowledge and research now seen as central to production processes.

In 1968 the Centre for Research and Innovation (CERI) was established within the OECD, partly as a result of a growing recognition within the Organization of the 'qualitative' aspects of economic growth 'as an instrument for creating better conditions of life' and, along with that, of a more comprehensive view of education's multiple purposes. By the early 1970s, then, the Organization had come to the realization that 'the full range of objectives of education had to be taken into account if the educational activities of the Organization were to make their rightful contribution to economic policy' (Papadopoulos 1994, p.64). According to Papadopoulos (1994, p. 122), this marked the triumph of a more comprehensive, less economic or human capital, view of education policy within the OECD, which possibly gave more importance to education's social and cultural purposes. Papadopoulos (1994) also shows that a (European) network of progressive sociologists of education was important to the emergence of this policy framing of education. This framing was apparent in the educational work the OECD pursued, organised under four programmes: two of them emerging from the Education Committee and the CERI Governing Board, with the other two being the more specialist programmes of Educational Buildings (PEB) and Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE). As Rizvi and Lingard (2001, p.250) illustrate, the educational projects sponsored by the OECD during the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate the significance of social justice purposes of education and a complex and mediated relationship between education and economic development.

Rizvi and Lingard (2001) go on to make two points about these educational programs. First, the programs were largely supportive of national agendas, brought to the OECD by the member countries. They pointed to an organizational politics characterized essentially by consensual processes of decision-making in which nation-states retained a great deal of power in defining the ways they wished to use the resources of the OECD. The OECD responded to national priorities and did not wish its own perspective imposed upon them. Second, these programs indicated the OECD to be a broad ideological church respectful of the diversity of ideological

positions. (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006, p.250) That was the period of the instigation of the country reviews, which surprisingly predate the international assessments by a long way.

Drawing on the institutional history of Papadopoulos (1994), they note his stress that the OECD at the time could not be viewed as an ‘homogeneous unit with a narrow, static agenda’, but that there were differences and ideological contestations across the Organization, in relation to both its economic and social policy agendas. Papadopoulos (1994) argues that until the late 1980s and early 1990s the social justice or equity emphasis won out in the education agendas of the OECD.

A brief excursion into the history of OECD illustrates the changing attitude to performance indicators within that organisation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, amid continuing ideological and philosophical debates about the nature and applicability of performance indicators to education, the OECD, and CERI in particular, explored issues of educational reform, social equity and innovation in terms that were more conceptual and philosophical than evaluative and statistical. This was the time of equity taking priority over efficiency. Within CERI, a culture of distrust towards performance indicators had developed over the years. By the mid-1980s, however, even CERI could not easily dismiss the pressures for a new effort to develop indicators. At the present time, indicators have been useful to CERI’s future scenarios work in respect of schooling and more recently in relation to tertiary education. Henry et al. (2001), drawing on interview data, show how the US, in particular, repeatedly called for work on outcomes indicators, particularly in relation to school effectiveness, at one stage threatening to withdraw its support from CERI if its demands were not met. However, Henry et al. (2001) also demonstrate that, from a different ideological direction, France - with its bureaucratic interest in statistical data collection - joined with the US in pushing the OECD towards the direction of developing educational indicators. With both the US and France, there was also probably a republican tradition (and possibly a bureaucratic one in France as well) of numbers used for progressive policy purposes, somewhat akin to a ‘political arithmetic’ tradition within British sociology and social administration.

In a Presidential address to the Comparative and International Society, Heyneman (1993, p. 375) describes a visit he had made to the OECD in Paris in 1984 following an acrimonious meeting of the board of directors of CERI. At that meeting:

‘The US delegate was said to have put a great deal of pressure, and in very direct language, for OECD to engage itself in a project collecting and analyzing statistical education ‘inputs and outcomes’ - information on curricular standards, costs and sources of finance, learning achievements on common subject matter, employment trends and the like. The reaction among the staff of CERI was one of shock, and deep suspicion. Those whom I interviewed believed it was unprofessional to try and quantify such indicators, and that it would oversimplify and misrepresent OECD systems, and that it would be rejected by the twenty-four member states whose common interests they were charged to serve’.

The construction of the International Indicators of Education Systems project -INES

However, such was the strength of the United States’ convictions that CERI had no other choice but to concede. It bowed not only to internal pressures within the OECD, but also to the popularity of the accountability movements in several member countries at the time, where decision makers had for some time been calling for comparative data to assess and monitor the effectiveness of their education systems. Papadopoulos (1994) comments: ‘It seemed therefore logical to add an international dimension to these national efforts, even though the difficulties, both conceptual and technical were fully recognised from the outset’. Moreover, because of the considerable groundwork which had been done, the OECD was ‘well placed to respond to the mounting pressure in the late eighties for a new governmental effort to develop such indicators’ (1994, p. 190). Thus by the early nineties, as Heyneman went on to observe, the doubters had been won over and the Indicators project had become fully established within the OECD’s educational work-reflective, he argued, of a burgeoning ‘new industry of comparative education’ (Heyneman, 1993, p. 378).

However, as Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) persuasively demonstrate this was new thinned out version of comparative education reincarnated as a form of governance.

In September 1991, the second phase of the INES project culminated in a major meeting at Lugarno where the first draft edition of *Education at a Glance* was presented. It contained data on thirty indicators which ranged from relatively traditional items such as participation rates, to complex and contested measures such as characteristics of decision-making within the system. This meeting also launched *Making Education Count* (CERI, 1994b), a publication addressing a range of conceptual issues and revealing the extent to which many matters of definition, bias and validity of comparison and inference remained unresolved. So, for example, it remained unclear how comparative data should be applied in measuring the relative progress a system might have made with respect to particular objectives. The question of relative weighting that a system might attach to particular indicators within its framework of priorities also was unresolved.

Organisationally, a Policy Review and Advisory Group was established to work closely with the secretariat to establish a stronger anchor for the work in policy considerations, and a group of national coordinators was appointed to consult with the secretariat in the oversight of the operational aspects of INES, and to 'contribute to the diffusion of an indicator culture within education circles' (OECD/CERI, 1995, p. 4). This is one significant way how the OECD works, through suasion and diffusion, through discursively constructing the parameters for policy possibilities and discussion. This is significant in relation to the Henry et al.(2001) thesis of the OECD becoming more of a policy actor during this time. Also significant was the integration of the various statistical activities in education under a new division within DEELSA, the Statistics and Indicators Division. When Education became a separate Directorate within the OECD in 2002, an Education Indicators and Analysis Division was established, which now manages INES and PISA. The thinking behind this move was to put together the resources of the Education Division and CERI, but more significantly and symbolically, the move represented the mainstreaming of the OECD's indicators work in education, from developmental status to its status as a core activity of the Organisation. It was at this point, too, that the project was put under the direction of a 'new guard' of statisticians, finalising its move away from its philosophical starting point to a more technical, operational one. It is these high level capacities which have enhanced the OECD's Indicators and PISA work.

The 1990s then saw some remarkable shifts in the development of educational indicators within the OECD: from philosophical doubt to statistical confidence; from covering some countries to covering most of the world; from a focus on inputs to a focus on outputs; and from occupying an experimental status to being a central part of the Organisation's educational work. More recently consideration has been given to linking the indicators used by OECD with outcomes measures of performance such as those of PISA, to a consideration of which we now turn.

PISA: the background

The idea of an international comparative assessment of student performance was not new to OECD work when PISA was first conceptualised. In fact, OECD's 'Green Book' throughout the '70s was one of the first efforts to establish a model of gathering and comparing educational statistics (Papadopoulos, 1994). However, it was not until the mid-1980s when the measurement of indicators of educational success was to become one of the areas of primary interest for OECD: as already discussed, the establishment of the INES project was one of the first organised attempts to standardise and compare educational statistics at an international scale (Martens et al., 2004). Indeed, PISA represents the developed and more sophisticated version of the work which INES began, with the important distinction between PISA and other indicators being the fact that PISA generates its own data, rather than relying on already extant national data as with *Education at a Glance*.

PISA has its roots in those first attempts to establish frameworks of international comparison, even though there was some initial internal resistance against them (Martens et al., 2004, Henry et al., 2001). In addition to Education at a glance annual reports, which mostly cover the investment of human and financial resources in education, the operation of educational systems and the individual, economic and social returns from investing in education, PISA aimed to establish regular and reliable international measures of students' educational outcomes, especially those that measure skills. Today, PISA is conducted in a relatively devolved manner, since data is gathered separately at each one of the national centres. There are only four people at the headquarters of OECD in Paris that manage its collection and processing (Martens et al., 2004). Nonetheless, even though most of the statistical work is conducted by the OECD member and non-member countries, it is the OECD staff members who decide on the frameworks of questions and orientations that the survey applies. These are decided in collaboration with experts, practitioners and politicians.

According to Martens et. al. (2004), the idea of the PISA project was presented to the member countries as early as 1995. Five years of deliberations and piloting of the project resulted in an agreement on the framework of the survey. Within the framework of the OECD, the design and implementation of PISA is the responsibility of an international consortium led by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). This consortium is commissioned on behalf of OECD. Other partners in the Consortium include the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO) in the Netherlands, Westat and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States, and the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) in Japan. In PISA 2000, the Consortium implemented PISA within a framework established by a Board of Participating Countries (BPC) which includes representation from all countries at senior policy levels. In PISA 2003 BPC was replaced by the PISA Governing Board (PGB), 'which includes representation from all countries at senior policy levels' (OECD, 2005, p.10). Both BPC in 2000 and PGB in 2003 established policy priorities and standards for developing indicators, for establishing assessment instruments, and for reporting results. According to the PISA 2000 Technical Report (OECD 2002):

Experts from participating countries served on working groups linking the programme policy objectives with the best internationally available technical expertise in the three assessment areas. These expert groups were referred to as Functional Expert Groups (FEGs). By participating in these expert groups and regularly reviewing outcomes of the groups' meetings, countries ensured that the instruments were internationally valid and that they took into account the cultural and educational contexts of the different OECD Member Countries, that the assessment materials had strong measurement potential, and that the instruments emphasised authenticity and educational validity (OECD, 2002, p.17, our emphasis).

National Project Managers (NPMs) implement PISA at the national level of each participating country. They have the role of developing and validating the data collection, through verification and evaluation of the survey results, analyses and reports (OECD, 2005).

Finally, the OECD Secretariat has the general responsibility and management of the programme and acted as the interlocutor between the Consortium and the PGB.

Based on OECD's report *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills - A new Framework for Assessment* (1999), participating countries and the international consortium developed test items which were then reviewed by subject matter specialists and assessment experts. Assessment items were trialled twice on a sample of students. In PISA 2000, reading literacy items were submitted by ACER (37 questions), CITO (16), Finland (12), Denmark (2), Belgium (8), Sweden (6), New Zealand (9), USA (7), France (10), Greece (3) and Switzerland (5), whereas a large number of questions (23) were derived from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Translation issues were considered and items were sent to participating countries for reviewing purposes; items were reviewed according to i) students' exposure to the content of the item, ii) item difficulty, iii) cultural concerns, iv) other bias concerns, v) translation problems and vi) an overall priority rating for inclusion of the item. After a series of meetings throughout 1999 of all FEGs and the Cultural Review Panel, the specific

set of test items that would be administered for PISA 2000 was decided upon. This was the attempt to ensure culture fair tests as the basis for international comparisons of student outcomes. The apparent detachment of the skills and aptitudes tested from specific national curricula is central to this attempt and raises interesting issues in relation to future attempts to extend PISA to younger students. The decontextualisation from specific national curricula seems central to the comparability issue.

PISA has come a long way in a short period of time and has consolidated the role of OECD and its Education Directorate as preeminent globally as the organisation for developing and analysing comparative international educational performance data. This role reflects a number of confluent factors, not least of which has been the positioning of the OECD itself. The development of a policy as numbers approach in several of the member and participating nations in the context of globalization and a policy consensus towards competitiveness of national economies being dependent on the comparative quality of educational performance, are very significant factors as well. PISA results now receive a very high profile within national media and as such they are at the fore in the consciousness of senior policy makers in education as well ministers and other politicians. Media coverage of PISA results is very substantial and perhaps represents another manifestation of the 'mediatization' of education policy processes (Fairclough, 2000, Lingard and Rawolle, 2004).

To conclude this section, PISA offers a useful illustration of the shift in the OECD's role as a policy instrument and forum - that is, as a catalyst facilitating policy development in member countries and assisting processes of policy dissemination, adaptation and borrowing - to that of an international mediator of knowledge and global policy actor. This, in turn, has contributed to the construction of a European and, for some, global education policy field. These 'faces' of the OECD are not mutually exclusive, of course, because the indicators work at two levels. At one level, indicators may indeed assist member countries to clarify and compare their own policy stances and also in relation to PISA allow some focus on matters of equity; simultaneously, though, international indicators draw countries into a single comparative field which pivots around certain norms of provision and performance. Policy learning and the desire to dip into the OECD's global comparative knowledge pool has been triggering another successful (and profitable!) old OECD project, that of the 'Reviews of National Policies for Education'; it is to them that we will now turn.

The OECD Reviews of National Policies for Education: A focus on the Scottish report (2007)

As the OECD itself suggests, the 'Reviews of National Policies for Education are most prominent among a range of activities that lead to analyses of education policy development and implementation in response to or anticipation of wider economic and social trends and developments. There is involvement of Ministries as well as professional groups, researchers and others, in formulating and carrying out the work and in discussing the findings. The aim is to improve the understanding of issues, implications for education policies and experience with the range of national policy options and strategies'. (OECD 2016).

Education policy reviews proceed in several stages: preparation and completion of a background report by the country undergoing review; a two-week mission by an external team of reviewers; preparation and completion of the review report by the external team; and a 1 to 1½ day review session at the OECD Education Committee, when the Minister (with input from senior staff) comments on recommendations and conclusions of the review team and responds to questions of other countries' delegates to the Education Committee. Recent work includes a very high number of reviews from a diversity of countries; according to the OECD, recent reviews included countries such as the Netherlands, Latvia, South Africa, Dominican Republic, Russia, Scotland, Bulgaria, Korea, Ireland, Italy, Estonia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Chile and many others. Indeed, going back into the OECD archives it is difficult to identify countries that did not ever have at least one OECD review of their education system (in many cases there have been multiple reviews).

The report of the external review team, edited to take into account the main points raised in the review session, is then published. According to the OECD, they are tailored to the needs of the country and they are

rarely specific; their scope is usually very broad with the goal to provide recommendations on ‘effective policy design and implementation’. Generally the analysis covers strengths and weaknesses which are primarily based on OECD’s collected data (from studies such as PISA, TALIS, PIAAC or earlier OECD reviews), national research, review visits to the country and OECD’s ‘extended knowledge base of effective policy reforms and their implementation’ (OECD 2016b). Finally, the programme of reviews now consists of a follow-up of each country review. After a period of about two years, ‘authorities of the country concerned submit a short note to the Education Committee in which they report on progress and developments. Discussion takes place as a regular item in the agenda at a bi-annual meeting of the Education Committee’ (OECD 2016).

The OECD Review of the Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland

It was 2007 when a team appointed by the OECD conducted the review of ‘Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland’, a review which was requested from the Scottish Labour/ Liberal government in November 2006. The report aimed at benchmarking Scotland ‘against international standards’ (Scottish Executive 2004). As with all reports of this kind, the review team was asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Scottish education, but also comment on specific reforms being pushed at the time, such as the then new Curriculum for Excellence. Together the OECD and the Scottish Executive prepared a set of terms of reference for the Review and a timeline. Following this step, a set of experts from comparator countries were selected: Simo Juva (from Finland, the country/champion of the OECD PISA), Frances Kelly (New Zealand) and Dirk van Damme (Belgium), with the rapporteur and final report to be chaired by an academic expert from Australia – Professor Richard Teese. There is no formal justification for the choice of experts – however, given that Australia’s education system was originally modelled on the Scottish education system and Australia adopted a similar outcomes-based Curriculum similar to Scotland’s, it is perhaps on the basis of those similarities that Teese was selected (Lingard and Rawolle, 2008).

The team visited Scotland for two weeks in March 2007, shortly before the May General Election and the formation – for the first time- of a Scottish National Party (SNP) minority government. Specifically, the team visited four local authorities and came in dialogue with a range of actors, from researchers to policy makers and local stakeholders. Similar to most of these OECD Reviews, it was informed by a Diagnostic report prepared by the Scottish Government in advance – this was a briefing document which was outlining a national overview of the education system in Scotland (Scottish Executive 2007). The Review took account of the PISA data for Scotland, but was also informed by Scottish school data and – to a lesser degree- Scottish educational research, whose ‘quality and impact were commented by the team’s rapporteur when he presented the report to stakeholders in December 2007’ (Teese 2007a; Raffe xx). This mix of international quantitative data in combination with local visits, reporting by the national government and the use of national data, allow for a unique opportunity not only to offer international comparative analysis, but fully legitimise this analysis and do it with the blessings of the national policy making world. We should not forget that all these Reviews are conducted following a formal invitation by national governments to the OECD to deliver them – their importance is perhaps even greater than the influence of PISA data as Raffe here contends:

‘ An international report of this kind provides a rare opportunity “to see ourselves as others see us”, without the usual filters of domestic mythology and sectional interest. The report presents familiar features of Scottish education in a new and sometimes less comfortable light. For example, what Scots may see as vigorous tradition of general education is perceived by the OECD panel as a narrow, conservative and social exclusive ethos of schooling. What Scots see as a flexible curriculum and qualifications framework is seen by the panel to offer insufficient challenge to low achievers and to divert energies from the need for curricular and pedagogical innovation. What Scots see as a consensual , partnership- based model of governance, is seen by the review team to produce confused lines of responsibility , barriers to innovation and too little autonomy for local authorities and schools’ (Raffe, 2008; 22)

Notable is also the OECD's delivery of the report and its recommendations; accepting that a two week fieldwork may not be able to cover the full depth and breadth, historical as well as political, of an education system, it does not propose that it offers the definitive reform plan. Instead, the OECD Director of Education, in her preface to the report suggests that it 'will become *part of the public debate* of education in Scotland. *Its ultimate value will hinge on how well it nourishes the debate* and how the Scottish Government interprets and applies its messages' (OECD 2007; 4, my emphasis). As became evident in the months and years after the publication of the report, the Scottish Government did not in the end make much use of the Review's recommendations; with the excuse that it was requested by the previous government and not the SNP, the report did not have the impact that its authors may have liked. However this may be less important here – what is more significant is the very careful handling of the report by the OECD, which not only took national expertise and local knowledge into account, but even suggested that the ultimate aim of the report is not to bring change but to assist a national conversation of the state of schooling in Scotland. This could be seen as a key moment – often overlooked- when the international statistical machinery of PISA meets the local, national and contextual with all its political nuances and prohibitions. In addition, it comes into stark contrast with the OECD's one-sided, dominant and heavy-handed discourse, which divides the world in winners and losers, or otherwise, those who follow the OECD policy recommendations and those that do not.

Finally, another interesting aspect of the report, and the one that appeared to be the most uncomfortable one for its recipients, was the fact that the Review was not only giving recommendations in regard to substantive issues, such as the achievement gap, vocational education or the qualifications reform, but also on the Scottish education governance model: the Review argues that 'there is only limited knowledge of "what works", and successful experience is not harvested, even if it is circulated through professional development and inspection...Schools should be funded to innovate and to produce durable change. Moreover, this should be part of a national learning effort in which experience is tested and builds into knowledge on which all schools can draw...(OECD 2007; 145). The proposed enhanced performance monitoring and accountability would be part of this 'national learning effort'. Raffe is again very eloquent in describing how the international enters the national policy space and forms a judgement:

'These comments illustrate how international observers can present the familiar in an unfamiliar light. The Scottish style of policy making, which seeks progress through consensus, partnership and tacit agreement rather than formal regulation [...] is seen by many Scots as a virtue. It appears to the OECD panel as a muddle in which responsibilities are unclear, concepts are confused and rigorous evidence and analysis are shunned in the name of consensus... This model ensures that the experiences of practitioners, learners and stakeholders contribute to policy debates, and the policy development is informed by implementation.

The Review targeted perceived complacency in the Scottish system directly and was accused by some as showing an uncritical belief in New Public Management; however, given that its recommendations came at a timely moment when the Scottish government was signing concordat with local authorities in an effort for more devolved local government, it was received positively by those who had questioned the true extent of partnership and consensus (Humes, 2003, Raffe and Spours 2007).

OECD as a boundary organisation: beyond the standardisation vs contextualisation debate?

A central issue arising from this analysis is the relationship between the production of knowledge and policy. There is a vast literature on the knowledge and policy continuum as well as on their co-production, especially in the field of 'hard' science. Analyses from the field of studies of science and technology have explored the new regulatory role of transnational expert institutions, like the OECD, that are meant to possess both the knowledge base and the expert networks to produce scientific evidence for policy making. In an interesting analysis of the World Bank in producing policy to combat global poverty, St Clair has masterfully shown the negotiated nature of the 'objective' data offered by such institutions: 'definitions and assessments are not account of facts, but rather "fact-surrogates", well-structured parts of an ill-structured and complex whole' (St

Clair 2011:59). St Clair draws on Désrosières to discuss the relativity of statistics in the pursuit of knowledge for policy making; she shows how the choice of what and who counts as expert in producing evidence for policy is not only a methodological question, but also an epistemological and a moral one. Applying insights from science and technology studies, St Clair suggests that the transnational expert organisations have to be analysed on the basis of their ‘boundary work’; that is in relation to their ability not only to produce knowledge but also new social orders. She discusses the problematic and self-fulfilling nature of what she calls the ‘circular dynamics’ of expert knowledge, since -she suggests- the audiences that are meant to legitimate the knowledge produced are in fact audiences that have, to a large extent, been generated by the expert organisation itself. Finally, she uses the work of Jasanoff (2004) and Guston (2000) to make a case for the role of international organisations as ‘boundary organisations’:

‘The crucial role of these institutions is, then, to assure the stability between the domains of science and politics, to speak to principals in both domains and to do so in a way that integrity and productivity can be assured. Speaking differently to different audiences, boundary organisations can bring stability to usually controversial issues. ...[they] may be a way to avoid the politicisation of science as well as the scientification of politics’ (St Clair 2006: 68).

The OECD has become the boundary organisation par excellence in the field of transnational education governance. With its work on the construction of performance indicators and more recently with its success in international comparative testing, it has emerged as central producer of policy-oriented knowledge in the developed world; and it offers not only measureable and comparable data but also -what is considered- reliable guidance for policy making. The case of the Reviews of National Policies for Education is a good case in point; it shows how masterfully the OECD can now combine both the technical capacity of producing vast comparable education data from around the globe, whilst at the same time offer very specialised, contextual and politically sensitive evidence to national governments – the latter, by inviting the OECD to evaluate their systems, not only gain evidence and policy recommendations they may need both short- and long-term but they also appear as any government always wishes to appear- global, dynamic, competitive, reliant on expert knowledge of high quality standards. The extent to which the policy recommendations are ever adhered to is a wholly different matter –and perhaps the question for another research. (At least in the case of Scotland, almost none of the recommendations were followed through).

Through the networks it has developed both in the scientific and the policy world, the OECD has become a central node in the structuring of the global education policy field. However, how has this come about? If boundary work is necessary for policy making in controversial policy fields, such as genomics, climate change, migration or global poverty, what is it about education that requires this kind of dual agency, the need to be speaking to and persuading both patrons and peers?

There may be two answers to this question: first, the nature and history of education policy making in Europe and secondly, the lack of a dynamic by the European Commission’s DG Education and Culture (DG EAC) in shaping policy in European member states. Starting from the latter, when the OECD developed the expertise to conduct large international comparative tests and thus had for the first time relevant evidence for policy making, it also acquired reputation and recognition in the field –characteristics that DG EAC had never managed to have. As we saw from the Scottish example above, national policy makers began turning to the OECD for evidence to legitimise policy choices at home and so –surprisingly perhaps- did the Commission. Since the OECD had both the data and the persuasive power to change policy direction at nation-states, national governments would use it as a point of mediation between their own policy agendas and international quality benchmarks. This is where St Clair’s description of the ‘circular dynamics’ of the policy making process appear to have also been the case in education governance, too; the technicisation of education problems and failures through the dominance of education indicators and statistical performance data has to subsequently become legitimised politically. In other words, the paper argues that the OECD is a

boundary organisation because it does not simply discursively construct new problems (process of problematisation) and then offers their technical solutions (their technicization); through careful political and face-to-face work, it *re-contextualises its data to fit local politics and national policy agendas* – this last phase, of *legitimisation*, is crucial for the work of all boundary organisations.

The construction of the European education policy space has been one of a continuous battle against a resisting nation-state education system which had embedded traditions and histories that were threatened by its emergence (Grek 2008; 2009). Indeed, in the face of increasing internationalisation and globalisation, national education systems have been strengthened, as education is seen as an important policy area, one of the few left to still be administered nationally and locally. Global and European policy actors are faced with strong local pedagogies, politics and histories, which for some are still seen as the cornerstone of the idea of the nation-state itself. Thus, in contrast to other policy areas like climate change or genomics for example, the controversy that a boundary organisation like the OECD deals with, is not a scientific one; rather, it is deeply political and historical, and therefore perhaps presents even greater risk-taking when it comes to proposing reforms both at home and in ‘Europe’. This is perhaps why standardisation appears to happen hand-in-hand with contextualisation; given its mastery to do both, the OECD has become not only a site for the co-production of knowledge and education policy, but a powerhouse.

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