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Governing by Numbers: the PISA ‘effect’ in Europe

Sotiria Grek*

This paper examines the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which has become a major and influential component of the OECD’s educational work. This measure of comparative performance of educational systems of member and other nations is based on tests commissioned by the OECD. The paper discusses the role of the OECD in establishing the ‘comparative’ turn and also describes PISA, its management and effects. It provides three examples of the impact of PISA in Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom before moving the focus to its impacts at the transnational level, through an examination of how key European policy actors see PISA and its effects. The paper concludes that PISA, through its direct impact on national education systems in Europe and beyond, has become an indirect, but nonetheless influential tool of the new political technology of governing the European education space by numbers.

Introduction

This paper¹ focuses on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment and suggests that, through its impact on national education systems in Europe, although apparently separate and distinct, it plays a rather indirect, but no less important role on the governance of the European education space. PISA is not limited to Europe and has indeed a far greater, almost global, reach. Nevertheless, on the one hand, Europe represents a substantial part of the OECD world; on the other, according to a key actor at the Education Directorate of the European Commission,

We used to have great competition between the two institutions [OECD and the EC] which was that they were research-based, we were policy-based. And we needed that. They needed the policy aspect to mobilise the European consciousness...it was in their interest working with us ...We had some differences but we are working closer and closer together, we are very very good friends now, there is no conflict (EU3).

The paper examines the role of the OECD in framing and steering education policy at a European and global level and moves on to briefly examine the first recently completed cycle of the PISA assessment (2000-2006). It uses three examples, the cases of Finland, Germany and the UK, and their responses to the PISA 2000 and 2003 assessments, in order to examine the ways in which PISA enters these national policy spaces and acts on them in ways that govern and shape education activity. The paper then draws on interview data from key policy actors in Brussels to make a case for the significance and impact of such governing tools not just at the national level,

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¹ The paper derives from on-going work conducted in the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) *on the European Science Foundation Eurocores project ‘Fabricating Quality in European Education’*¹, which looks at processes of quality assurance and evaluation in education systems by means of data production and use, with a particular emphasis on the cases of Scotland, England, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. The UK element of that project ‘Governing by Numbers’ is funded by ESRC (RES-000-23-1385)

but on other international organizations and their agencies, such as the European Commission. The paper concludes by suggesting that, as the policy officer above clearly argues, since the two international organizations have been sharing a broadly similar policy agenda for some time now, PISA and its effects may be seen as a useful tool in the project of building the new European education space of competitiveness and cohesion (Council, 2000).

The paper builds on interview data from key policy actors in the countries examined, as well as from the Commission. It also uses documentary data, in the form of OECD policy text and press reports. All data are derived from collaborative research work in the project ‘Fabricating Quality in European Education’ (<http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/research/FabQ/index.htm>).

OECD and the politics of comparison

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 economicist 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 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 global policy space in education (Lingard and Grek 2007; Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor 2005).

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) (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007, p.6).

The education work of the OECD has become a very important, node in this complex policy field, as education policy is seen as central to the competitive advantage of national economies in the face of globalization. Evaluations of national education and training systems require international points of comparison. The OECD has filled this niche in relation to education policy in terms of its work on indicators generally and specifically through PISA. Taken together, these factors account for the increased significance of the education work of the OECD, its contribution to the emergent global education policy field, and its enhanced role as policy actor. In the next section I look in more detail at the organization and content of PISA.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is conducted in three-yearly cycles and examines the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in compulsory education. The OECD develops the assessment tasks used in PISA through commissioning agencies to produce the tests. Thus PISA works with tests that are developed and mandated by OECD. Although PISA began as a joint study of the OECD member countries, it has developed its scope to involve non-member countries as well. Indeed, since the year 2000, when the first PISA study was conducted, more and more countries have been taking part, with the latest PISA (2006) having assessed students in 57 countries all over the world, thus involving 27 non-member participant nations. This shows the significance given to the test globally, since even countries which are not OECD members want to be seen to be taking part in the international comparison. According to a policy actor in England asked about the participation of non-member states in PISA, these countries:

‘...might choose to see PISA as more relevant for them or certainly in terms of the comparisons you can make. They don’t necessarily want to be making comparisons with countries like them, they often want to be making comparisons with the member countries and the economic part, how far they have got to go in order to catch up...They come to PISA because they want to be compared with these leading countries...’ (CP2E)

This international dimension of the survey, which overrides the boundaries of Europe to compare student performance in countries as diverse as the United States, Greece and Indonesia, gives PISA a particularly significant weight as an indicator of the success or failure of education policy. PISA is the OECD’s platform for policy construction, mediation and diffusion at a national, international and possibly global

level (Rizvi and Lingard 2006).

Instead of evaluating knowledge on the basis of the curriculum or the cultural and life experiences that 15 year olds have, PISA:

‘...provides international comparisons of the performance of education systems, with strong, cross-culturally valid measures of competencies that are relevant to everyday, adult life. Assessments that test only mastery of the school curriculum can offer a measure of the *internal* efficiency of school systems. They do not reveal how effectively schools prepare students for life after they have completed their formal education. (OECD 2001, p. 27).

The concepts of comparison and internationalisation give PISA its substance, since it is in the comparisons of school outcomes across the world that policy makers can now find answers to their problems:

‘PISA offers a new approach to considering school outcomes, using as its evidence base the experiences of students across the world, rather than in the specific cultural context of a single country. The international context allows policy-makers to question assumptions about the quality of their own country’s educational outcomes’ (OECD 2001, p. 27).

De-contextualisation, commensurability and policy orientation have been the key ingredients contributing to PISA’s success. However, the sheer scale of the enterprise may distract attention from fundamental questions about its purposes and effects. For example, one should not lose sight of the importance of PISA as a ‘shop front’ for OECD. Through advertising the OECD’s capacity to do such work, it has become the evaluator of choice. The assessment of comparative system performance has direct effects on the shaping of future policy directions, and the reporting of PISA results adds to the sense of urgency in responses to PISA as Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal point out:

‘Such researches produce a set of conclusions, definitions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ educational systems, and required solutions. Moreover, the mass media are keen to diffuse the results of these studies, in such a manner that reinforces a need for urgent decisions, following lines of action that seem undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally asserted’ (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003; 425).

PISA has been conducted three times to date: in 2000, 2003 and 2006. While always testing reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, its innovative dimension -and part of its interest as a governing device- lies in the fact that, as noted above, it does not examine students’ mastery of school curricula, rather the focus is on an assessment of young people’s ability to practically apply their skills in everyday life situations. The focus on ‘real-life’ circumstances and on students’ capacity to enter the labour market with core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, has taken PISA’s focus of interest away from less explicit educational aims that resist measurement (e.g. democratic participation, artistic talents, understanding of politics, history etc), towards a more pragmatic view of education’s worth: ‘its relevance to lifelong learning’ (OECD 2003). Indeed, PISA is one of the first international student

assessment surveys that applies concepts such as ‘literacy’, previously connected only with adult learners, to school pupils. According to OECD (2003), PISA has an:

‘...innovative approach to lifelong learning, which does not limit PISA to assessing students’ curricular and cross-curricular competencies but also asks them to report on their own motivation to learn, their beliefs about themselves and their learning strategies’ (OECD 2003; no page numbers).

This is significant, since lifelong learning is seen to expand and include compulsory education. This emphasis on lifelong learning is indicative of the concern to embed responsibility for continuous self-improvement and upskilling in the individual learner from a relatively early stage in their development. It connects the production of data to the growing self-governance of active subjects, and extends governance into a system of self-regulation (Rose 1992; Ball 1998). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, according to the same document, a key feature of PISA is:

‘its policy orientation, with design and reporting methods determined by the need of governments to draw policy lessons.’ (OECD, 2003; no page numbers)

Hence, it is made clear that this is not simply a testing regime –it is constructed and operates under a clear and specific policy framework, which is to be adopted by the participant countries if they are to improve their future PISA assessments and thus improve their standing in attracting economic and human capital investment.

PISA has come a long way in a short period of time and has consolidated the role of OECD and its Education Directorate as the preeminent global organisation for developing and analysing comparative international educational performance data. PISA results now receive a very high profile within national media and are present in the consciousness of senior policy makers. 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). I will now move on to an examination of the PISA effect on the national context, by looking at the examples of Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom. Finland, having done exceptionally well in the full PISA cycle, is still basking in the glory of these positive results. Germany, in contrast, was encouraged to undertake urgent educational reforms. Finally, the UK case reveals some interesting differences between Scotland and England in relation to PISA.

Finland

The outstanding success of Finnish students in PISA has been a great joy but at the same time a somewhat puzzling experience to all those responsible for and making decisions about education in Finland. At a single stroke, PISA has transformed our conceptions of the quality of the work done at our comprehensive school and of the foundations it has laid for Finland’s future civilization and development of knowledge. Traditionally, we have been used to thinking that the models for educational reforms have to be taken from abroad. For a long time, we thus turned to Germany for these models...Today, thanks to PISA, the situation seems suddenly to have changed, with Finnish schooling and Finnish school practices in the focus of the international attention (Väljjarvi *et. al.* 2002, p.3).

Indeed, ‘the Finnish miracle of PISA’ (Simola, 2005) has been at the centre of international attention since the first PISA results were published in 2001. Even though the PISA success was initially received within the country with great surprise (‘from a country following the examples of others to one serving as a model for others’ [Väljærvi et al. 2002, p.3]), the Finnish ministry of education was soon to attribute the positive results to an education system that offers both high quality and equality to its students (online, Ministry of Education 2007).

According to Väljærvi et al., non-differentiation is the secret of the success of the Finnish comprehensive school. Instead of tracking and streaming, Finnish teachers are in a position to cater for the needs of individual students. This is thanks to the ‘highly educated, a pedagogical expert’ (2002, p.42) Finnish teacher, who is generally regarded very highly in Finnish society. In addition, due to the absence of any national tests or examinations upon completion of compulsory schooling, teachers’ assessment of their pupils is all the more important. Finland does have national grading guidelines for performance but, according to the Finnish PISA team, these are flexible and allow for a broad definition of student achievement (Väljærvi et al. 2002). Teachers in Finland take decisions themselves in regard to the textbooks they are going to use; the early 1990s reform on the curriculum brought greater curricular flexibility and pedagogical freedom than ever before. Therefore, the official reporting of the country’s PISA results supports the conclusion that comprehensive schooling, in addition to teacher autonomy and motivation, were the decisive factors in the high performance of Finnish students.

In terms of the ways that PISA results were received by the Finnish government and media, it is remarkable that the Finnish press was found to have mentioned the country’s success in only eight pages, whereas Germany, one of the lowest performers, received 687 pages of press attention (European Network 2004). Interestingly, the announcement of the results of an international assessment of this magnitude was received with neutrality by the media and perhaps with surprise from the Finnish government, which apparently decided to move into announcing further reforms, despite the almost global acclaim for their existing system. PISA seems to have been used here to mobilise policy action aimed at securing constant improvement against the country’s results:

Paradoxically, shortly after the international publication of the first PISA results, the Finnish government made a decision to harmonise the education system by adding to the share of compulsory studies in comprehensive schools and by giving more weight to core subjects...Assessment results and political decision making on education do not always go hand in hand (Väljærvi *et al.* 2002, p.44).

Germany

The results of PISA 2000 had a major effect on Germany’s education system. Rankings that placed it 20th in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy among 32 countries, were a severe shock to policy makers, school teachers and parents. The

negative results dominated the German media, which presented them in almost all newspapers. Project leaders gave several interviews, experts offered their interpretations and roundtable TV discussions were also held (European Network 2004). In response to the PISA findings, German education authorities organised a conference of ministers in 2002 and proposed reforms of an urgent nature, such as developing standards for measuring students' competencies upon completion of secondary schooling and the introduction of large-scale assessment testing at the end of primary and secondary education.

Teachers were under increasing pressure, especially with the delivery of new reform measures, and urgent measures were deemed necessary to focus the system more on outputs rather than inputs and to develop standards regarding skills upon completion of school and entry into the labour market. Despite criticisms of the PISA testing frame and statistical validity that came from within the country (see Wuttke 2006), new projects were initiated. Some of them, in direct response to the PISA testing model, were Chemie im Kontext (CHIK), Physik im Kontext (PIKO) and SINUS (Steigerung der Effizienz des mathematisches-naturwissenschaftlichen Unterrichts) (Federal Ministry online). Further, the PISA-Konsortium Deutschland produced reports on the development of the competencies of German pupils (Prenzel et. al 2004). Finally, national tests of learning outcomes in core subjects were also introduced for the first time in the country. What we see here appears to be a common phenomenon in relation to PISA results and their reportage: an initial critique of the statistics themselves and a questioning of their validity, but then an apparent acceptance of the data and appropriate policy responses to the situation as defined by these data.

Pongratz (2006) maintains that no other empirical study managed to stir up the educational policy landscape in Germany in the way that PISA 2000 did. He compares the 'flood' of discussions and reform measures that PISA brought with the crisis scenarios that German education experienced in the 1960s, and particularly what was then called the *Bildungskatastrophe* (Pongratz 2006). According to him, the 'PISA-shock' has had major impact not only on policy making, but most crucially on the public consciousness. However, according to him,

'This result is clearly cause for critical self-reflection, but it is not in itself a sufficient basis for the frantic radicalism of the resultant reform measures. It seems that something is operating through reform strategies of diverse types that has the capacity to exercise enormous pressure. This pressure functions as a strategic element within a currently active global transformation process driven by a wide variety of organisations and actors' (Pongratz 2006, p.472).

The PISA results, apart from curricular reforms, brought a whole new conceptualization of the German school as a self-managing organization, in need of new quality control measures, applied in different combinations by the federal states: school inspections, self-evaluations, assessment tests and teacher professionalisation have turned the German education system into a peculiar mixture of centralisation and decentralization.

United Kingdom (UK)

PISA is administered separately in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Wales is included in the English sample), but the UK is regarded as a single national entity by the OECD for the PISA purposes. The then Department for Education and Skills (DfES—now the Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF]) commissioned the Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to carry out the study in England. The Social Survey Division also conducted the survey in Northern Ireland, in collaboration with the Central Survey Unit of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The Northern Ireland survey was commissioned by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI). Finally, the Scottish Executive commissioned the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE, University of Glasgow) to conduct the study in Scotland.

In both in PISA 2000 and 2003, England had difficulty in reaching the required response rates, in order to be included in the survey, arguably due to the large amount of data collection already demanded of schools. However media in the UK showed very high interest, reporting the results with headlines such as ‘School is far more fun in Scotland’, ‘Teenagers are world-beaters when it comes to maths and science’ etc. (European Network 2004). In contrast to the press in other countries, the UK media did not report the negative elements of the results extensively. In particular, the significant gap between the performance of pupils from well-off and deprived backgrounds that was to be found in both the 2000 and 2003 surveys did not attract media attention at all. On the day of the publication of the 2000 results, PISA generated nine prominent national newspaper lead stories and featured in the national news twice on that day and several times by the end of the week.

Tony Blair, the then UK Prime Minister, commented on the PISA 2000 results on the day of the publication in the House of Commons: ‘The country should be very proud of the OECD survey, which is a tribute to the hard work of pupils, heads, teachers, governors and parents across the country’ (European Network 2004, p. 13). In PISA 2000, the UK took the 7th position in reading literacy, the 8th position in mathematical literacy and the 4th position in scientific literacy. DfES produced booklets summarising the findings for teachers and headteachers and distributed them electronically through ‘TeacherNet’, the Department’s website for teachers and heads of schools. Finally, teacher unions held a conference on the PISA 2000 findings in 2003, which was very well-attended by teachers, policy makers from the DfES, OECD representatives and politicians (including David Miliband, then Secretary of State) (Teachernet, 2007). A DfES/DCSF official, commenting on media interest in PISA, noted its significance as a ‘brand’:

‘I think PISA probably gets the most attention and that’s not because it is any more valid or reliable, it is simply because OECD has done such a brilliant marketing job with PISA. So it is a real brand name, ministers are familiar with it, politicians generally are familiar with it, the press, the education press and beyond are all familiar with PISA’ (E2)

No concrete initiatives were undertaken in the UK -in either England or Scotland- in response to PISA results. The same DfES/DCSF official saw no impact on policy at national level, but wondered if practices in England were influencing international systems because of England's success:

‘At the national level? I don’t think we’ve noticed that, we are not changing our systems in any particular way to accommodate...maybe the other way round is happening. I don’t know. No, I don’t think we got such thing going on.... At the policy level it was more of an affirmation that we were on the right track, except that we could do better in terms of equity. At the political level a great deal was made of it because you know it was looking pretty good stuff’ (E2).

In Scotland, the Scottish Executive published a report for PISA 2000 through its Education and Young People Research Unit (Scottish Executive, 2002). According to it, in PISA 2000,

‘Scotland was in the top third of countries in all subjects assessed. The results indicated that Scotland’s 15 year olds performed significantly better in terms of attainment in mathematics and science than our 9 and 13 year olds did in earlier international studies, and this is likely to be the case in reading too’ (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 3).

In the Scottish Executive report, the analysis of the results ranges from examining PISA results in general, to looking at the performance of the UK and sometimes offering Scotland-specific comments. These are mainly used to justify and reinforce the reasoning for measures and policies already under way. For instance, according to the report, the relationship between students’ views on the school climate and students’ performance was considered significant and thus supportive of ‘the emphasis in Scotland in recent years through school self evaluation and the Ethos Network’ (Scottish Executive, 2002, p 12). Interviews with members of the Inspectorate and the Executive’s Analytical Services Division point to a strategic use of PISA to establish Scotland in the wider world:

‘But I think it’s partly about you know this is putting Scotland on the map. We do quite well in PISA so what more can we extract from that by way of evidence on our position in the world.’ (S1)

In addition, PISA is a source of reassurance to policy-makers in Scotland, especially in relation to their adherence to a different model of quality assurance and evaluation from that in England, with no national testing, and an inspection regime that promotes self-evaluation:

‘.....we have the reassurance of PISA for example, suggesting that overall our students are, on average reasonably pretty high performing anyway. The PISA data I don’t think could be seen as a huge driver in the inspection model, because it is favourable for Scotland. There wouldn’t be any particular basis for saying, oh because of PISA we must do this or that’ (S2).

Having had briefly examined three national ‘cases’ as examples of the ways PISA enters the domestic front and impacts on national education systems in Europe, it is interesting to move on to examine the views of European policy makers operating at

the level of Brussels. What are their views about the impact of PISA on European education systems? How has PISA contributed to the dominance of evidence-based policy making in the European Commission? Building on findings from in-depth interviews with two key policy actors from the European Commission and its agencies, namely the Research, Indicators and Analysis Division in the DG Education and Culture and Eurydice, the next section examines the PISA impact on policy making at the European level and especially in relation to the shaping and steering of education policy transnationally.

PISA and Europe

We support OECD in carrying out a number of surveys by supporting member states. We pay 80% of the national costs by the budget of the Union... We have meetings very regularly and we have even joined projects now. We work very closely with them on evidence-based policy making (EU3).

50-60% of the data for the EU's indicators report for the Lisbon strategy are from the OECD, yes. And of course are the same (EU4).

International organisations such as the OECD and the European Union should not be seen as monolithic institutions but as part of the 'global architecture of education', described as 'a complex web of ideas, networks of influence, policy frameworks and practices, financial arrangements and organizational structures' (Jones 2007; 326). According to the Eurydice actor, the Commission is highly dependent on PISA data, first, because it pays substantially for it, and secondly because collaboration on data collection between the two international organisations has increased significantly over the recent years:

And we also work with OECD because the OECD is the main coordinator for the UOE² data which is 60% of the data that we use in such a report and that means that we participate in all the meetings of INES, the scientific committees of OECD. We go to all these meetings and we have a seat and agreement with the OECD, a formal, very formal, an official agreement that the Commission has a seat in all their committees (EU3).

So those involved in the collection of data at European level or at the international level in OECD tend to be more and more closely related. Also because at EU level it would cost too much money to develop such instruments like PISA. So of course you have to cooperate and I think it is good because there is no extra money to spend -it is the philosophy that is different that we argued and I think this is still the case. The corpus of data is the same, OECD, Eurostat and Unesco, they share the data but then when you look at the products and what you do with the data, makes the difference. And where you use it (EU4).

PISA has been a major instrument in providing data for the European education systems and shaping the ways that European experts and networks operate and the policy areas they focus on. For example, in relation to the Commission's relatively

² Initials for 'Unesco-OECD-European Union'

newly-established ‘peer learning activities’³, PISA seems to be shaping interests and travel itineraries across Europe:

The agenda is to better understand what Finland is doing to succeed in PISA. What do they do? Specialised teaching or individualised teaching? So they go to Finland, these experts, not just to travel, they go to Finland in order to best understand what Finland is doing. Can the Finnish experience actually inspire something to be done in England – which will be an English decision and an English matter. So this transfer of experiences is very complex and very difficult because what is in the mind of people is if I transfer a system, will that work? To identify the elements of success that are relevant to your country and which can be used in your country and have roots in your system, that’s very difficult and we don’t have the methodology for doing it. But we can at least go from this logic of identifying objectively one way or another good performance and then approach an understanding of why and how they do that. Then inspire other countries to at least reflect what they can learn from that (EU3).

What is not challenged here is the explicit policy orientation PISA has, on the basis of which its data are being collected. PISA data in Europe seem to be a given –the problem appears to be how to deal with them. It is seen as an objective assessment of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ performance that currently lacks contextualisation and that more ‘traditional’ European methods, such as European networks and policy experts, can work on. Interestingly, these policy transfer mechanisms appear to lose ground (‘My critique is that I don’t believe intellectually they have the methodology for looking at anything. They look at things that shine’ [EU3]). OECD technical expertise and PISA in particular has become the impetus for a drive in the Commission towards establishing their own technical capacity –this is not just a question of producing better or more relevant data. It is a political decision, which relates to education markets and the development of statistical expertise at sites much closer to home:

We see the very big reports they publish and it is always Australians, Canadians, Americans that run away with the money. Always. It is ACER that is the Australian one, ACER that sits on the big contracts of analysis on PISA or TIMSS or whatever national survey, they sit on it. This has been a problem for Europe, for European countries for many years. Especially France that protests, they say this is Anglosaxon, American controlled organisation, we don’t want it. Therefore we should develop a European capability of doing these things. It was in view to do this with the language indicator which is very big contract, 6 million, that we are doing this year. We reflected on how can we develop a capability of European research institutes to compete in this field, so we are not giving money to Australians, Canadians, how do we develop the competence of doing such big competences at the European level (EU3).

Analysing the narratives of the two European policy makers, one can clearly feel a tension; with the dominance (and quality) of PISA data taken-for-granted, the discussion focuses on its impact. There is an evident split between focusing on PISA data and its policy directions in order to look at specific issues where standards need to be raised and equity gaps closed; and the opinion of those who find PISA data useful, but feel that the ‘philosophy’ and principles of governing European education cannot be reduced to the results of one testing instrument. For example,

³ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc32_en.htm

This report gives the information but it doesn't focus (shows a Eurydice report), it doesn't give policy directions. So if you cut down, personally I would go down to one indicator. That would change according to the agenda, but now it is school drop-outs. For me, drop-outs or low performance in literacy in PISA (EU3).

However, from a different view-point,

The ranking of countries is not a problem at the OECD level. It is in the EU. So I would say the corpus of data is the same [but].... OECD has its own product, the EU has its own product because it has a different philosophy and a different approach. Not harmonisation of the systems but diversity, working as I said with the convergences using the research results (EU4).

Finally, it seems important for the Commission to maintain a balanced approach to the emphasis and weight they give to surveys from other international organisations, such as the IEA, as well:

We participate around all discussions around PISA and around TIMSS⁴ and we are very critical of seeing PISA as the ultimate answer of what counts in education. It is a tool amongst others, it measures with some instruments that can be improved, our people manage to use it to do something. We think that we need to have a much better understanding of what we look when we look at PISA data and we have argued that we should do that by looking at what TIMSS does. Not replace the one with the other but look at them together (EU3).

Conclusions

Instruments at work are not neutral devices: they produce specific effects, independently of the objective pursued ... which structure public policy according to their own logic (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007, p.3).

This paper has attempted to illustrate quite different PISA 'results' both at the national as well as the transnational level: from the PISA-surprise of Finland, to the PISA-shock of Germany, the PISA-promotion of the UK and the focus by the European Commission on the possibilities PISA data have created. What is constant is the acceptance of PISA -and the parameters and direction that it establishes- along with its incorporation into domestic and European policy making.

In particular, PISA data are used to justify change or provide support for existing policy direction in both the domestic and the European contexts. This tendency is less marked in England: I suggest that England's relaxed response to PISA stems from its long-term investment in high stakes testing, and its highly sophisticated system of data production and use. As a consequence PISA occupies a less central position there. It is significant as a measure of a 'world class system' but is perhaps not much needed in a policy discourse that justifies its education reforms on the basis of competitiveness and choice, where the process of 'modernisation' is already well-established, and where there is confidence that national data and policy directions for

⁴ The IEA Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

its use are at the leading edge in such developments. Europe, on the other hand, has found in PISA a valuable source of data about the systems it is meant to govern – however, political choices, such as who produces these data and their cost, how one uses these data to understand different education histories and political contexts, and finally how one strikes a balance between the levels of cooperation with other IOs such as the IEA, seem to be issues of great concern.

Responsiveness to PISA across the different participating nations and by other IOs can be seen as an instance of what Luhmann has called ‘externalisation’ (Luhmann and Schorr 1979 quoted in Steiner-Khamsi 2004). That is, the reference to ‘world situations’ enables policy-makers to make the case for education reforms at home that would otherwise be contested. Thus ‘local’ policy actors are using PISA as a form of domestic policy legitimation, or as a means of defusing discussion by presenting policy as based on robust evidence. The local policy actor also signals, to an international audience, through PISA, the adherence of their nation to reform agendas (Steiner-Khamsi 2004, p. 76), and thus joins the club of competitive nations. Moreover, the construction of PISA with its promotion of orientations to applied and lifelong learning has powerful effects on curricula and pedagogy in participating nations, and promotes the responsible individual and self-regulated subject.

Finally, PISA is a major governing resource for Europe: it provides knowledge and information about systems, and implants constant comparison within the EU member states -without the need for new or explicit forms of regulation in education. With Europeanization being understood as having the potential to be simultaneously a response to, as well as a conduit of, globalisation (Rosamond 2003), PISA clearly seems to constitute an important node in the complex task of governing European education. This reading of PISA supports this paper’s overarching argument about its use and meaning as a political technology: a governing resource for both the national agency and the trans-national forces of EU and the OECD.

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